



ALEXANDER'S INFINITY

LIDIJA STANKOVIKJ
ukiyoto

ALEXANDER'S INFINITY

Lidija Stankovikj



Ukiyoto Publishing

All global publishing rights are held by
Ukiyoto Publishing

Published in 2021

Content Copyright © **Lidija Stankovikj**

ISBN 9789354901119

All rights reserved.

No portion of this publication may be reproduced, stored in any electronic system, transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise, without written permission from the author.

Events, locales, and conversations have been recreated from memories. In some instances, in order to maintain anonymity, names of individuals and places have been changed. Some identifying characteristics and details such as physical properties, occupations, and places of residence have been changed. The names, places, and/or people are fictitious. Any that seem real is created from the imagination of the author.

The names of cities, towns, and characters are also a fictitious form of writing.

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, resold, hired out or otherwise circulated, without the publisher's prior consent, in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published.

www.ukiyoto.com

CONTENTS

PART 0: ORIGIN	1
0: Prophecy	1
 PART 2⁰ : HOME	14
ℳ Canine	14
ℵ Cardinality of Love	22
ℙ The Shelter	32
ℱ The Spirit Cobbler	40
℔ The Second Cosmic Unit of Time	47
◁ Slovenly Musings	57
× Antithesis	65
ℙ Fractal Snowflakes	75
ℵ Bitter Men	86
 PART 2¹ : INDIA	99
○ Freshet	99
◐ Rose	106
◑ Seed	113
● Hazelnuts	119
◑ Cavansite	126
◐ Foodies	136
○ Detachment	143
○ Kamadeva	146

PART $2^0 + 2^1$: BURMA	152
ပထမ Demerit	152
ဒုတိယ Drops of Water	164
တတိယ The Algebra of Bliss	177
စတုတ္ထ The Flame of the Forest.....	185
ပဉ္စမ Emptiness	194
ဆဋ္ဌမ A Pond for a Turtle, A Cave for a Monk	202
သတ္တမ Pigeonholes and Hermits	213
အဋ္ဌမ Matryoshka Monk	222
နဝမ From Infinity to Zero and Back	230
 PART $\frac{2}{0}$: THE END (OR A NEW BEGINNING)	238
∞ : A Chapter of Infinite Possibilities	238
 ENDNOTES	239

PART 0: ORIGIN

0: Prophecy

He was born on a moonless night. Somewhere, outside the boundaries of their world, other people considered the time of his birth to be very auspicious. His parents, though, were of a different opinion. They gave him the name Tamas, a child of the darkness. *It is a proper name*, the elders remarked, for it suited not only the absence of light which welcomed his arrival, but other facets of his existence as well, such as his complexion.

In all honesty, a peculiar event had presaged the conception of the child. On another moonless night, nine months before Tamas was born, in a shanty house in her shanty town without electricity, his mother Satya was sleeping on the bamboo mat rolled out over bare ground. When she suddenly felt a sting near her left ankle she screamed in disgust, and a black rat stuck under the pleats of her *sari* responded with an equally hostile series of squeaks, before it untangled itself and ran away on its odious little feet. Satya wished this was just a dream, in spite of the well-known fact that, *in their world*, a pest bite had never been a rare occurrence. At sunrise, when she got up to do the household chores, she saw the scarlet half-ring teeth marks on her swollen leg, and concluded she must have been bitten by a rodent of a remarkable size.

While in labor and giving birth to Tamas, praying in her pain for her baby to be facing the right way and to be born before sunrise, Satya's screams were laced with the squeaks and squeals of the rats from the gutters. Tamas was born four hours later, a healthy baby whose eyes would immediately get used to the absence of light.

Rubina, the beauty-turned-sage of the *jhuggi basti*¹, knew well the power of the mud to shape one's destiny. With a bough of a *gular*² tree, she drew oblique shapes and wrote arcane words in her *Oracle of Dust*, until the verdict was out: Tamas would either become the poorest among the poor, or the crookedest among the crooks. The boy's

father Aparas heaved a wheezy sigh of relief—Tamas had a look-in for a future different than his own.

Upon hearing Rubina's words, an old man who was squatting nearby let out a toothless laughter, having understood the univocal decree. Satya was the only one to pay heed to the elder's reaction. When she asked him to spell out his laughter, his eyes glistened for a bit, and he then replied that *there was no such thing as the lowest of the low, nor the deepest of the deep. To every poor, he said, there is always someone who is further deprived.*

It did not take long before Tamas experienced all sorts of lucky breaks. Weighing a little over two-and-a-half kilos at birth, he was already better off than any other child born that year within the same neighborhood. By the age of two he had survived diarrhea, before he turned three a hemorrhagic fever and, on his fifth birthday, he had successfully crossed all the major thresholds of survival, leaving so many others behind.

For eighteen years Aparas, the coolie, toiled not only for food and clothes, but to also provide every opportunity for his son to see the world outside their land of dust and mud. The child became his dark shadow, the purpose of his life, and followed him everywhere. Whatever he did, Aparas always made sure that not a single day passed without his son learning at least one important lesson.

While crisscrossing, together with his father, the alleys of that innominate world, Tamas acquired certain tacit knowledge. He befriended the *rikshawalas*³ and learnt the routes of the territory, both the public and the uncharted ones. He ate with the *dhobis*⁴ and the *jamadars*⁵, and understood that words such as *clean* and *pure* often meant something different. The *paanwalas*⁶ let him see the capacity of small things to stain and uglify. The *lohaars*⁷ convinced him that steel remained steel, in spite of its changing shape and purpose. Everyone taught him something, and Tamas accepted all the lessons, without the slightest trace of partiality.

By the age of thirteen, the boy's lungs got used to the chili-laced air of the spice markets, his eyes could see through the smog of the traffic lanes, and his discolored

fingers seemed to have grown resistant to the metals in the scrap batteries. Tamas learned the jargons and the tricks of the trade of a hundred hidden worlds behind the corrugated iron walls of his own neighborhood. But more than anything, he understood how invincible the power of this network was, even when its knots appeared to be small, and its threads almost invisible.

This went on for many years. Aparas never let Tamas stay at home, except at night. He feared that the hut, made of corroded aluminum panels, would gradually corrode his son's spirit. The world outside their colony was not always a pretty one, but at least it was big enough to make dreams (and propitious prophecies) tenable.

Tamas led a life that blinded him to the hues of the *jhuggi basti*. Every morning he left the bed early, before the sun rays could even touch the far horizon. Every night he returned to it, long after the last reflections of the street lights touched the outskirts of the big city. He never saw in daylight the contours of his little shanty town.

He was eighteen the day he saw Anjaani, a slender girl whose walk resembled the swaying of a bamboo stem in the wind. Her thick, waist-length braid and dimpled cheeks made his chest rattle in a newly discovered rhythm, while his pupils widened like a frog bubble after the rain. He caught the first glimpse of the girl the night she came at the door of their hut to borrow from his mother a cup of *atta*⁸ flour and a little bit of sugar. For the first time in life, Tamas realized that his *jhuggi basti* was all the world he ever needed. It was a perfect little world, that mash of tin, dirt and sweat. It contained bliss.

One day, Aparas brought his son home earlier than usual, after an accident at the construction site, where two of his friends fell from a scaffolding and died. Bad things come and go, but hard work must be carried on. After spending the night mourning the loss of his friends, at sunrise Aparas went back to work. It was the first time to go without his son. That morning Tamas said he felt feverish and tired, and requested to be allowed to stay at home. With no lack of obvious reluctance Aparas finally agreed, but insisted that the boy was not to leave the bed until full recovery. The instructions

were clear, but they did not account for Tamas' growing desire. That was Father's first mistake.

It didn't take long before Anjaani's parents noticed a sudden cheeriness in their daughter's gait and, within a month, the girl was married off to a bus driver from a *basti* far away from theirs. Tamas was told to try and forget her as soon as possible, for the poor neither had time to mourn a lost romance, nor a hope for fortuitous turnarounds.

Not too long after Tamas experienced the darkness of a first love, he gradually became more aware of—and somewhat obsessed with—his own physique. He couldn't help but notice that, in spite of being already at the peak of his adolescence, his height and the muscle mass were not even remotely comparable to those of the stars from the TV screen. If there was one thing Tamas never lacked since he was five, it was physical activity—yet all those years of work had not given him the desired result, while a simple workout at the gym made other boys of his age look like superheroes. At first, Tamas did not fully understand the causality between the body shape and the neighborhood. Determined to decipher the mystery behind his inferior physique, with an eye of a fashion model scout he began to pay close attention to the other boys, analyzing with detailed scrutiny their anatomy and stature. He understood, at last, that those born on the proper side of a *jhuggi basti* fence never had to fight the irreversible effects of childhood stunting and wasting.

And then came the year of the local elections. Aparas and his friends got crazy with joy. The city was bursting with development projects, such as fixing road potholes and rainwater gutters. This meant temporary job security for the daily wage workers like them. The fact that it was the hottest month of the year did not bother them—the opportunity had to be seized, and saying *no* to work was an option reserved only for the fools. On one such hot, asphalt-melting day, Aparas' otherwise sharp reflexes melted too, and in a moment of carelessness, a paver vehicle ran over his leg. That was Father's second mistake.

That day Tamas became the single breadwinner in their family of (by good luck) only three. After the incident he also noticed that, just like the streets were full of lame dogs, their *jhuggi basti* was in no dearth of limping men. The young man who had never had proper schooling was now slowly but surely (*on the ground*) learning the rules of correlation and causality, without even knowing what those links were called in the language of the learned men.

One day, rumors of possible displacement suddenly started to spread. A new colony, a luxurious gated community for the affluent, was to be built on the very same ground of their *jhuggi basti*. Father's third mistake was to dismiss the likelihood of such a scenario, under the ill-informed assumption that the rich would never come anywhere near the poor and the untouchable. The view from those high apartment towers raised above the muds of the *jhuggi basti* would be magnificent, the builder advertised—the residents would enjoy a sight of luscious greenery (one of the last few sanctuaries in the area), and of a beautiful lake (again, one of the very few remaining in the city).

Fancy words started flying around, ready to bite like flies before the rain. Smart city, beneficiaries, urban development, gentrification, inclusive growth and at least a dozen-or-so other buzzwords entered their lives, promising to transform them. The fact that their *jhuggi basti* had existed longer than its residents' collective memory seemed not important at all. Money and power outclassed their customary rights. Aparas' and fifty other families exited their homes.

So, where could they go? The natural choice was to find another slum. Tamas took his prematurely aged mother and conspicuously disabled father to another colony for the unwanted, only to discover that the denied could be even less generous than the denier. *If we let you take a piece of this tiny shade we have, some said, what good will come out of it—should we all get burnt under this scorching sun? There's only so much a square yard of soil can yield,* others explained, *even if it's dug with two pairs of hands and two hoes.* Eventually, Tamas and his parents settled on another dumpster, inhabited by only a handful of other families of (once hopeful) migrant workers.

And then Tamas remembered the network of *dhobis* and *jamadars*, *rikshawalas* and *paanwalas*, *lohaars* and *kumhaars*⁹. A dangerous world it was, that network which provided support but also threatened to swallow him in but a moment of carelessness. Tamas had no fear, for he had spent his whole life learning how to transverse that world, barely noticed, like a tiny insect able to fly in and out of a spider web, anytime it wished so.

And just like the Sun and the Moon take each other's place in the cosmic play of light and darkness, so did Aparas and Tamas swap places in their everyday life. Tamas took over the role of a breadwinner and became the very image of what his father used to be—a coolie of a dozen jobs, *harphan maula harphan adhura*¹⁰. Aparas, on the other hand, became his son's shadow, and a reminder of what young men born in a *jhuggi basti* were bound to turn into.

One day, Aparas finally understood why his life's mission of keeping his son outside the shanty town had been altogether futile. He realized that, rather than being just a neighborhood, the *jhuggi basti* was much more—it was the totality of the people, the jobs, the food and the conversations, all measured by the size of their own *chappals*¹¹. His people might have been thrown out of a *jhuggi basti* made of mud and corrugated iron, but their *real jhuggi basti* did not end there—it somehow permeated into the new space in which they continued to exist or subsist. This truth was not liberating at all. Within a year, Aparas gave in to (undiagnosed) depression, and died of a broken dream.

Tamas felt as if half of his world had just collapsed. People told him his father had lingered onto the old prophecy far too long; they said that the unfulfilled hope for a better life for his son was the real reason for Aparas' demise. That's what triggered Tamas' pursuit for the truth; he knew that he had never honored the prophecy the way his father had, and he thus felt as if he had betrayed not only a parent, but the gift of life as well.

It was then that Tamas realized he could not afford to waste any more time. He had to finally *understand*. It was time to fulfill a destiny.

You can do it, his inner voice kept telling him. No need to try and grasp the big world out there. Look well inside a jhuggi basti. Be among your people, stay among those, whom you know best. They can teach you more than you will ever need to know.

So once again he turned to the *dhobis* and the *jamadars*, the *rikshawalas* and the *paanwalas*, the *lohaars* and the *kumhaars*. He asked them what they feared, what they hoped for, and what they expected from their lives. He asked the *doodhwalas*¹² and the *kasaais*¹³, the *rajgirs*¹⁴ and the *darjis*¹⁵, the *naiis*¹⁶ and the *maalis*¹⁷ what excited them, what inspired them, and what lifted them up.

He remembered everything he heard, and kept asking for more; in fact, he didn't stop until he was absolutely certain that they had poured their hearts out and shared every last bit of their dreams and nightmares. Was it hard to win their trust? Not at all, for they all craved for someone who would listen, rather than talk. With utter patience, Tamas listened day in and day out to everything they had to say. His visage, reminiscent of a night that swallowed their sins, did not reveal a single sign of judgement.

All those men whose stories Tamas listened to loved the attention. And no small stories were those, tales of misfortunes and troubles, of destinies jinxed, and lives erred. As if his very act of listening suddenly gave meaning to their personal histories, those men felt indebted to him. They offered him a cup of tea, a share of their plain *roti-daal*¹⁸ meal, and sometimes a *jalebi*¹⁹.

*You are so close to it, the inner voice kept prodding. Do not ignore the clues. Use your mind, Tamas, your clever, cunning, jugaad*²⁰*-apt mind. It is going to be worth it. Tamas, do not hesitate, the voice was warning him. If you stop now, if you withdraw now, something terrible is bound to happen.*

As if hypnotized, Tamas suddenly got visions of a certain future, in which he saw his older self. He was fifty, but he looked eighty. His once dark and lustrous skin was furrowed like a retracted turtle's neck. His eyes, once black and sparkling like a moonless night sky became dull and clouded. His mother was no more. He had a wife, a

nauseating long-tongued creature who walked swinging like a duck, as if both her hips had been broken. He was a father of five, four of which girls and all married off, and a son long gone, in pursuit for a dream outside the *jhuggi basti*.

The vision was so powerful, so *real*, that it shook Tamas to his core. He knew it must never come true. And with *that* conviction, in the darkest hour of the night, he fell asleep. It was during that moonless night, that his deep dream crystalized into an *insight*. When he woke up, he knew that he had finally understood. He had, indeed, found the well of hope, and he had seen its deep waters that kept nourishing those who should have, by any logic, long ago worn themselves out.

Forty-nine conversations later, everything Tamas heard and understood could be summarized in four savvy points:

- ◆ *It is fairly easy to separate a truth from a lie, but most people choose the lie over the truth.*
- ◆ *People prefer the lie because it is more comfortable than the truth, and because it provides hope.*
- ◆ *The bigger (the lie), the better.*
- ◆ *There is always a way to sustain a lie, no matter how ridiculous that lie may sound.*

Those four savvy points were not to be disclosed; besides, what would be the point of doing so? Nobody would have believed, nor would have taken him seriously. He therefore decided to keep them to himself, making sure he repeated them out loud every night, determined to always remember them.

He mulled over these truths over and over again. A few times he dreamed of his father, too. In those dreams, Aparas was asking his son to remain silent. *Do not speak*, Aparas was begging him. *Isn't it enough that now you know? What is there to share? What use of it? Your silence would be a way to honor all those people who have opened their hearts to you, and who have made you understand. Do not betray them.*

Discarding his father's plea as a manifestation of weakness and hesitation, one day, Tamas started talking again. That's not quite correct; in fact, that day Tamas began to *speak*. He spoke to a small group of *rikshawalas*, late in the night, at the time they finished their meal and were ready to bid farewell to another ordinary day.

'Everything is motion, everything in this world travels. To live is to travel from childhood to adulthood to old age. We are on a journey from ignorance to knowledge, from misery to bliss. Just think of it—life is like a bumpy ride on a rickshaw, where you are the passenger, and Life is the driver. Remember, each of us is given time, and we travel through it, rarely with grace, often with anger. It is up to you to decide: do you want to be driven from one grief to another, or from your present misery to a state of total bliss?'

The *rikshawalas* laughed in a synchronous quire. No-one could tell how much they understood, but that, in any case, was irrelevant. What really mattered was the fact that they could easily relate to the story. That night, they dreamt of a world in which their potholed roads became the very veins of a pulsating life. For the first time in their lives, they sat not behind the wheel, but in the passenger's seat, and they went on a very happy ride. The driver was none less than the *Creator*, whom they could choose to curse or trust to take them to the right destination, at a fair price.

When they woke up in the morning, refreshed and still smiling, they remembered Tamas' last words from the night before:

'Tomorrow, when your first customer comes, smile as you drive him to his destination. Remember that, after all, every day each of us keeps traveling through life. And who understands movement better than a rikshawala? Who can be better at it than a man who spends every hour of every day doing exactly that—helping others move from one point to another? Go ahead, be perfect at it, and expect the ultimate reward. Life will shower you with blessings.'

Having driven their rickshaws on the same roads of their ungrateful city for one more day, the *rikshawalas* came back to Tamas and asked for more. Tamas spoke again. Then the next day, too. And the day after.

It did not take long before the word spread, and the *dhobis* and the *jamadars*, the *paanwalas* and the *lohaars*, the *darjis* and the *naiis* came, too. Tamas had different stories for them. He had soulful tales which barely made any sense. But those tales were utterly soothing and self-gratifying. Above all, they were highly addictive.

And so, Tamas became known as Cintamari Babeesh Baba, the Master whose every thought was a gem, and every action auspicious. Within a year, Cintamari Babeesh Baba was revered by thousands. Within seven years, by millions. Set on a hundred acres of the finest indigenous forest area, his *Joy of Existing Centre* bursted with donors, practitioners and visitors from all walks of life, all eager to hear the famed inspirational discourses by the greatest Master alive. Those numerous disciples and devotees, representatives of various strata of the deeply divided society, all bowed down to the lotus feet of the Master. It was then, that those feet outgrew the boundaries of their *jhuggi basti*. The Master threw away his old *chappals*, just like the germinating bean, once it reaches the surface of the soil, quickly sheds off the two halves of the split seed. Cintamari Babeesh Baba finally started walking on carpets covered in sweet-smelling flower petals.

His wide range of uplifting discourses now slowly casted aside stories about *dhobis* and *jamadars*, *rikshawalas* and *paanwalas*, *lohaars* and *kumhaars*. They got replaced by tales of kings and warriors, ascetics and saints. In his words there was now less room for mud, potholes and corroded aluminum. He spoke of snow-white swans and water lilies, of journeys towards prosperity, and of jewel palaces.

The *Joy of Existing Centre* itself had three dreamlike lakes—a white-lotus, a pink-lotus, and a blue-lotus one. Three large buildings, each conspicuously opulent and resembling a palace, stood tall. Within the premises, numerous trainings were conducted, ranging from classical music and dances, to traditional healing and wellbeing techniques.

Cintamari Babeesh Baba caught the attention of all and sundry. He had no formal education, yet he quickly became the darling of the academic circles, and held guest lectures across campuses, inspiring students to compete without hating their competitors and to advance in science without ever forgetting the traditional knowledge. He had only ever held casual jobs, yet he advised corporates on how to manage responsibly, without having to compromise on either their profit or reputation. His *CBB Foundation* taught sewing to rural girls, trained village boys in animal husbandry, and distributed solar panels to slum dwellers.

Cintamari Babeesh Baba was the whole package; he was an inspirational speaker and a thought leader, an entrepreneur and a philanthropist, a sage and a true celebrity in the age of digital society.

He spoke words of timeless wisdom, while his IT team live-streamed his discourses on his very own web channel; his PR team arranged his international tours; the CBB Press distributed the latest hardbound, e- and audio-books; and the journalists wrote articles about the rise of his empire. He was celebrated as a living teacher, and his words were immortalized during his lifetime.

Is The Joy of Existing Centre the largest tax haven in the country?—read some headlines. CBB Products’ headline was ‘*Why globalize when it is wiser to localize,*’ urging people to become conscious ‘*de-consumers*’ who support ‘*the indigenous and thus ingenious*’ products and innovations ‘*from the land of the wisest and kindest nation in the world.*’ To his cynical critics (who labelled him ‘*Backward Baba*’) he responded by installing solar panels that supplied *The Joy of Existing Centre* with renewable energy. He then introduced electrical vehicles on his campus, to cut greenhouse gas emissions. He also invited all to enroll in one of his programs by paying in any cryptocurrency. And to the public eye, he opened his ultra modern, state-of-the-art robotics exhibit, where everyone (but especially the youngest visitors) could marvel lotus-seated robots, and get a glimpse into the future of artificial intelligence.

Among the *sadhus*, there were those who condemned Cintamari Babeesh Baba for being devoid of any spiritual lineage, and others who tried to appropriate his teachings by proclaiming him a member of their own *parampara*²¹. Medical practitioners labeled Baba's line of herbal products as being placebo at best and harmful at worst, while large retailers offered to partner with him by sharing a strong distribution network. Some politicians accused him of shattering the very foundations of tradition, while others went out of their way to associate themselves with the man whose single word of support could (literally overnight) cause a tectonic shift in public opinion and voting outcomes.

One day Anjaani showed up at *The Joy of Existing Centre*, and fell down at Cintamari Babeesh Baba's feet. She thought he would not recognize her but, in a split of a second, he uttered her name. She couldn't say if his pupils widened like a frog bubble after the rain; yet she still found something froggy in the puffy bags under his aging eyes.

She, too, no longer had a walk that resembled a sway of a bamboo stem in the wind. Her waist-length hair was now tied up in a bun. Her face was chubby, yet not devoid of her signature dimples.

Cintamari Babeesh Baba did not ask her about the bus driver from the faraway *jhuggi basti*. He himself was no longer Tamas, and thus he did not need to dig into the darkness of Anjaani's past. He just smiled at her and invited her to sit next to him. From that day onwards, Anjaani was known as Cintamari Babeesh Baba's caretaker. He didn't ask her any questions, so she, too, chose never to ask him about the past—neither about his journey, nor about the mysteries of his fundamental transformation.

Anjaani is the one who understands me best, Cintamari Babeesh Baba proclaimed in front of millions. *She has understood. She is the perfect disciple*. He soon developed a peculiar ritual—he opened every public discourse by offering a flower to Anjaani first. Consequently, in no time at all, she was also respected and revered by the millions of Baba's followers.

Regretfully, Aparas was no longer there to witness his son's transformation. Satya remained with her son throughout his entire journey from rags to riches. She fondly remembered the rat which had announced her motherhood and now finally removed all the obstacles from her, once troubled, life. Rubina and her toothless father, crouched in the heavens above, must still be peeking through the dense white clouds, and chortling at the fulfillment of an old, nearly forgotten prophecy.

PART 2⁰ : HOME

ⅴ *Canine*

The wind was vile. It awoke that smoldering pain of an old ankle fracture, and a new cavity twinge in my upper left canine. My feet dragged through the carpet of frost-rimed leaves that shimmered under the light of the tawdry street lanterns. With a cankered boredom of an ungrateful wretch I looked at the tree-arbores path laid out in front of me. Some resident crow kept a watchful eye from the bare branch of an old oak, as if guarding its soul hidden in one of the acorns that crunched under my boots. It smelled of coal, roasted chestnuts and forthcoming snow. I pulled up the collar of my woolen coat, trying to suppress the vapor of my breath from drawing smoky images in the winter air. I never wholly belonged there, and thus hated leaving behind crumbs of my presence to the ravenous birds of glee.

A denizen since birth, I liked to think I knew the city in every way. It bore my shadow so gracefully, that living here almost suited me. It took me a long time to understand *that*, which was fully irredeemable—it was people I was finicky about. The drawbridge between my soul and the world barely ever lowered. Friends mocked my academic bearing; colleagues disliked my logorrhea; and what to say of women—they mostly found me irrelevant. In the language of the alchemists, I stood at the point of *nigredo*, the center of my own darkness.

I was ripe for inner work, nonetheless oblivious to the need of it; and so I craved for the first snow. I admired its effortless ability to conceal from sight everything that has become dull to the eye and dreary to the soul. The grey asphalt of the street, the drab interior of the metro train, the formulaic geometries of the façades—they all get hidden within the focal distortion of the winter fantasy. I waited for some ethereal snowdrift to cover the marred edges of my *inner sanctum*, too. In this city, I brandished my intellect

against the degenerating ways of sociability, yet I somehow remained stuck in the rut of cunning amiability, where everyone smiled, but no one paid heed.

Amidst that quotidian darkness, I searched for a fillip, just a speck of meaning to give direction to the second half of my life. I hankered after some fleeting worthwhileness, even so cowering before the possibility that I, too, might be *altogether vanity*.

I do not think I *did* anything special, either consciously or willfully. Yet the night turned into a *kairos*, an opportune moment and a providential opening. Even though I did not recognize it at first, between then and now I have somehow turned my skin inside out. So this is how my *metanoia* began.

The previous night Anna (or could be Joanna), the Institute's new janitor, took an initiative to tidy up my notoriously unkempt office. She disposed off the old whiteboard sponges sodden in excess ink; she cropped the yellow-turned leaves off my window plants and replaced their rusted pot saucers with brand new, polka-dot ones; but most importantly (and disastrously)—she threw away the myriad pieces of paper that came in various shapes and condition (post-it notes stuck on my shelves and drawers, page corners ripped off from the local newspaper, and messy A4 sheets lying on the floor, right under my printer). I may have been punished for sticking to paper when I ought to have migrated, long ago, to the splendid world of digital records. But old school I was, and old school I remain.

Anna (or maybe Joanna) did not have the slightest clue about the value those soiled and unsightly pieces of paper held for me. How could she possibly know that, more than being paper shreds, those memos were the very soul of my research? They were pieces of an unassembled vision board. They held records of my questions, stimuli and ideas, among which some big and others tiny, many ordinary, but a few worthy of a hope for a breakthrough. I used to scribble equations on random pieces of paper, and then let each stay dormant on the margins of my vision-field, until the time was right, until they started making sense *together*. Once they did, I let those ideas converge towards a

common center, a theoretical problem good enough to be treated as a topic of some new research.

So Anna (or, very likely Joanna) violated my intellectual space and destroyed the building blocks of (at least!) seven to eight months of scientific pondering. What happened to me the moment I entered my once messy and now neat office can only be compared to a state of shock felt by a writer who has just lost a manuscript in a sudden and irreversible computer crash. Ivan, my next-door research assistant, threw an ill-considered remark. He said my case reminded him of a series of incidents across world museums, where cleaners either ‘fixed’ or threw away *untidy-looking* pieces of modern art. The idea of someone disparaging or mistaking my notes for garbage was less than flattering, and even though it seemed likely that Ivan had no other intention but to lighten up my mood, a sense of resentment lingered. At the risk of sounding boorish, I told him that the *Theatre of the Absurd* should have no place in a *School of Science and Mathematics*. Ivan, being who he is—a humbug maven of small (and politically correct) talk—threw in some rubbish, mealy-mouthed remark, hoping to pacify me. I doubt anyone was cognizant of the epic amount of civility at display in my non-verbal conclusion of the argument, on my way out.

Bitter was the taste in my mouth. Bitter were all my thoughts. That night, as I walked down the street—under the branches of those naked, frozen trees inhabited by ragged birds—I knew my tiniest iotas, too, had to be loaded with such bitterness.

And yet, in spite of that jaundiced state of mine in which anger fused with disbelief and fear of academic repercussions of Anna’s (or Joanna’s) brainless act steadily crept into focus, all I really cared about was Mia, the woman I had recently lost.

For a long time mathematics had been my monomania, a singular preoccupation of my mind. I now suspect that this mathematical insistence on consistency and precision has also been my *hamartia*, a fatal fault of my psyche that made every relation feel incalculable, and every love turn algedonic.

I was wearing my favorite pair of winter gloves. They were a gift from Mia, and I still clung to them as if they were a handsel, rather than mere carriers of an aching memory. Inside those leather gloves my fingers still felt the phantom touch of hers. Every single atom of mine pulled me away from home, for everything inside my apartment still smelled of her. All the same, like chips in a metal swarf, the pieces of my broken self easily gave in to the pull of a magnetic belonging. Heading home was in no way an assurance I would experience even a temporal relief; even so, it still seemed a far better option than staying in that office a minute longer.

In all truthfulness, it is difficult to tell if there was ever a place or a person I fully belonged to. I have only been devoted to two women. Having loved (and eventually failed) them both, I was starting to see the absurdity of it all; no two lovers can enter a *mandorla*—that divine intersection of two soul-fields—for more than a few brief moments in time, before each runs back to their own ego den, to reclaim their precious little individuality.

That evening, I was unable to shake off the synesthetic smell of roasted chestnuts and burning charcoal. That particular scent belonged to my memory of Sybil, just as much as it belonged to the streets of my city.

I don't like chestnuts. Truth to be told, I did taste once—out of bedeviling curiosity and a boyish desire to impress Sybil—a raw one. Sybil was my first (and for a long time only) girlfriend. She loved the hills and all places arboreal. I didn't share much of her fascination with trees; she loved them instinctively, I appreciated them mathematically. Even though I was quite young (and in possession of rather rudimentary maths skills), I ecstatically explained to Sybil that the branches and leaves of certain trees followed geometric patterns. I soon realized that she couldn't have cared less for any of it.

It was during one of those hikes through a forest covered in dense fern, skin-colored mushrooms and old chestnut trees, that I picked an open burr from the tapestry of brown-turned pine needles under my feet, and took the largest chestnut from the set of three. I quickly peeled off the brown husk, and popped the white core into my mouth.

Nobody had ever warned me against the *tannin* contained in the inner white skin of the peeled chestnut. Who would have known? The taste was so *bitter*, that I remember thinking the nut must have passed through the intestines of some despicable *goblin*. Seeing my face twist into a grimace, Sybil said I was out of my mind. My response was quasi-spiritual and unapologetically sardonic. 'That's exactly what I have been trying to achieve for many years now,' I said, 'freedom from the mind. If only it were as easy as it sounds!'

In the years that followed, I often wondered if those eccentricities of mine (although few and far between)—later augmented with my growing curiosity about all things metaphysical—had been the put-off that costed me Sybil's love. I refused to look the truth in the eye and accept that not every choice of hers had to be traced back to something I had said or done. The grace of life dictates that, as years pass, so do ache and resentment peter out; and so I gradually found myself thinking of Sybil less and less.

And then for a reason unknown to me—although, perhaps, perfectly consistent with the impeccable laws of the chaos—on that fateful winter night, on my way back from my distastefully clean office, I surrendered to the scent in the air. Just as I was about to reach my apartment, I approached a street seller and asked for a cone of roasted chestnuts, not knowing where this impulse had come from. He nodded and smiled as if I had said something of an extraordinary kindness and, using an old, rusted spatula, he quickly began to spread and turn a handful of chestnuts over a bed of coal. I stood there, watching the open fire create tiny sparkles in the air, which then quickly dissipated into dead specks of ash. As I opened myself to the sweet whiff and the sound of popping nuts, I recall wondering if anyone's coat ever got burnt from coming too close to the grill (and consequently, tried to imagine the size of the cinder burn holes). In some other universe, I thought, those holes might all be perfect circles; but in this one, they had fuzzy contours, each one probabilistically unrepeatable.

A tall man stood by, with a child's hand in his. With wide-eyed curiosity, the girl (and strangely, the father just as much) didn't seem to care about the fire—she came close, studying with great interest the alchemy of that bitter-to-sweet transformation. In those eyes which hadn't yet seen much of the world, the spatula must have looked like a wand in the hands of an adept warlock, the grill plate over the open fire could have been a magic pot, and those chestnuts that waited to jump into the paper cone—no less than a secret concoction. So total were her attentiveness and sense of wonder that I, there and then, felt (at least) twenty-one years younger.

The reason I could be so brazenly confident about those images in the mind of an unknown girl is beyond my ken. Was it mesmerism, or some sort of trance, I cannot tell—but all of a sudden, the air turned all stippled or pixelated, and silvery ashes started hovering around me. The stars appeared closer, the moon seemed fuller, and the ground softer. Some unexpected warmth embosomed me and, for a brief moment in time, my mind reclaimed the innocent cheerfulness of a lost childhood.

Nearby, a handicrafts woman wearing a huge Russian fur hat sold name necklaces to passerby. As I came closer and beheld the one that carried my name, each letter cast in silver alloy started to pulsate and widen. I reached out and held the pendant for a brief while, until those letters dissolved, melting in my palm like gossamer snowflakes.

Only the initial A remained. Rather than melting, it crystalized. A, the alpha or the *aleph* of my identity, slowly spun and morphed into a five-‘A’-ed lineation of a magic pentacle.



I am embarrassed to admit that I got carried away by the beauty of that short-lived mirage. I was so lost, that I neither pinched myself, nor removed my glasses, or checked my watch—I forgot to apply any reality check to determine if what I was experiencing belonged to some lucid dream of mine. But from where I stand now, I can see—without

the slightest trace of a doubt—that the winter night which I now recall with such vividness was the first tad of my *illud tempus*, my *time before time*, my self before *the transformation*.

‘Your chestnuts are ready,’ the street chef declared, waking me up from a state of deep hypnagogia. I stood there perplexed, not quite able to make sense of anything that had just happened. As if trying to prove I was fully awake (and still in possession of my sanity), I quickly visualized a cylinder of the same base and hight but thrice the volume of that paper cone²², effortlessly discarding the impracticalities of such a solution. After all, the petty arithmetics of my mental visualizations have always been nothing more than white noise of my cerebral mind.

I looked around and found the curly-haired girl still standing next to me. Her big blue eyes were riveted on the cone filled with warm chestnuts. Her heed was in such stark contrast to my jejune perception of winter that I, feeling swamped with peculiar uneasiness, decided to give way, and offer her my cone of chestnuts.

‘Why don’t you go ahead,’ I extended my courtesy to the man, ‘I can wait a little bit longer.’

The girl seemed happy, I thought, as she quickly turned back towards me. But rather than expressing gratitude, she said *I cannot see your face*, with an overacted mouth-covering gesture. Her remark shook me for a brief moment, and I instinctively ran my fingers over my beard, the color of acorns. I realized my upturned collar must have made me look strange and unapproachable, so I lowered my winter guard and offered an unfeigned smile.

‘You are very kind,’ said the man, still holding the girl’s hand. It was only *after* he stepped towards me that I noticed, pressed against his chest, a puppy huddled in his other hand.

'Would you mind if I asked a small favor?' he quickly added. 'Please hold him, just till I get a coin out of my pocket.' He said this with a nearly unnoticeable squint, and before I knew, he pushed the puppy right into my arms.

'It is hard to juggle life in one hand, and money in the other,' the man continued, not even bothering to look me in the eye.

'Sure,' I mumbled, as I tried to make sense of his words, all the while balancing my clumsy self around the perky bundle that stared at me.

I stayed away from pets ever since my mother put down Amber, our thirteen-year-old Angora cat. My mother surely tried hard to convince me (and herself, more than me) that she had spared Amber the agony of a life with poor sight and urinary incontinence. The inconvenient and far less flattering truth is that she had, in fact, chosen to euthanize her own pain of witnessing Amber's unsightly dotage.

I thought I had been standing in front of the grill for no longer than a minute, when I heard the raucous voice of the street seller.

'Your can have your chestnuts' he said, 'if you still want them.'

While picking up the cone, I looked around to find the puppy's owners; but that golden-haired, dewy-eyed girl and her sturdy yet debonair father (who, I admit, touched off a certain sense of inferiority in me) could no longer be found.

'Did you maybe notice which way they went?' I asked the vendor.

The guy responded he was not sure who I was talking about, denied he had noticed a man with a dog, and assured me he had seen far too many children, to remember any.

\setminus *Cardinality of Love*

A man can, at best, intuit his *tomorrow*. Yet with such fervor and frenzy he tries to remove any element of randomness from his *today*. He fears the arbitrary, refusing to consider the possibility that an accident might reroute life to a more favorable direction.

I was no exception to the rule. I preferred the backward-looking Janus.

In hindsight, my predicament was of my own making.

I had been telling myself (and others) that getting my research work published was necessary in order to remain a credible (or at least relevant) member of the scientific community. Outside the academic circles, my anxiety over high-impact journals and the *h*-index²³ was, by default, taken as a display of narcissistic false-modesty; ‘You are a professor,’ my acquaintances would say, ‘that too, in a discipline most of us find rather intimidating. What more do you need, to feel accomplished?’

To be specific, what I really needed were at least three more high-impact publications, to ensure frictionless promotion. The root of my anxiety was pure academic avarice. What all those intimidated-by-mathematics people did not know was that I considered myself an average thinker, a median performer in a highly competitive academic arena. And what scared me even more than the loss of my office notes was the possibility that I was no longer capable of producing any significant intellectual output. Who could really know? Maybe Anna (or Joanna) should be thanked for decluttering my office space; what if she indeed removed nothing but sheer garbage?

So yes, I admit—I was a claustrophobic misanthrope at the onset of a midlife crisis and with no partner as of late. Yet I was in no way an introvert or an escapist; on the contrary, in spite of my remarkable record of debacles, I had not yet discredited the possibility of attainable love, nor had I given up the pursuit of the other. I still needed

that special someone, to look at me with eyes that would convey anything else than the disdain I felt for myself. My mind was still rather preoccupied with women. I was a taker, not a giver. I neither needed nor wanted to own a puppy.

That winter night I must have walked miles. I crisscrossed the city square and checked every last one of the adjacent streets, until my feet stiffened. *How is it even possible to forget a dog?* It's not a pair of gloves, or a mobile phone, or a set of keys to be displaced. I was nonplussed, as I frantically searched for the untraceable father-daughter duo. Moreover, the thought of a small child crying her eyes out after a lost puppy unsettled me, even though I had never been fond of children.

I was trying to wrap my mind around what had just happened. The puppy had huge, moist and guileless eyes. Having felt its rhythmic heartbeat and the warmth of its breath all over my palms, I knew I had to find its owner before things went out of control and I grew tender of my new companion.

I went to the lost and found office at the train station. They refused to even make a report, as neither did I have a train ticket as a proof of a journey, nor had anyone reported a missing pet. 'This is not a place where one can leave unwanted pets, because we do not accept disposed items,' a muscleless man behind the desk rejected me briskly. *His perfectly circular spectacles are perfectly congruent with the idiocy of his circular argument*, I thought, and decided to respond in a kindred style. 'I would have thanked you,' I said, hissing through my teeth, 'if there was anything to feel thankful for.'

I let my irritation bring out the worst in me by giving in to passive-aggressive hostility, but at that point I couldn't have cared less about any manners.

I walked down the fountain bridge, towards the northern part of the city square, where vagabond bohemian artists gave themselves airs. I don't know what made me think that the haunt of social misfits and renegades would be a reasonable place to go. There was no trace of the people whom I was trying to find.

To add to the bizarre turn of events, I even received an unsolicited kiss; a girl in a small group of tipsy adolescents, whom I stopped to ask for directions, came forward, patted the puppy's ears, laughed out loud and took a selfie with the puppy, before she briskly kissed my cheek and ran away. My 'cuteness index' must have soared the moment I lifted up that baby animal.

I felt a twinge of envy at all those youngsters who could, always effortlessly, sum up their mood in a trite 'feeling satisfied' or 'feeling crazy' or 'feeling meh' status. I could easily be dismissed as too verbose and musty for this age of one-liners and three-day spectacles. Perhaps a non-verbal statement would have been an *echt* sketch of my current state; but I was old enough to stop treating my face as worthy of a selfie-cum-emoticon update. And besides, why should the world know about my inner state?

That night I walked a lot and thought a lot. My mind, too, became a vagabond; it went to strange places, somehow always spiraling back to Sybil. I quickly rationalized that the resurfacing of those memories had something to do with the recent trauma of losing Mia; the more I thought of something that had happened years ago, the less painful the wound that was still open.

I recalled the day after I turned twenty-one, when Sybil said she was leaving me. My initial reaction was irrational and resentful. Rather than dealing with the aftermath of the situation, I was fixated on the manner in which she communicated her decision. I thought she threw a shard of pity when she chose to wait with the news till my birthday was over.

It took me many years and another failed relationship, to understand how poor I had been at picking up cues.

It was a strange time, a dark time—that age of twenty-one. Astrologically, the planet Saturn squared itself in my birth chart, threatening to swallow my sanity just like *Kronos* devoured his sons. As per the gnosis of the theosophical schools, I stood at the threshold of a new seven-year cycle of physical and spiritual regeneration.

Mathematically, my age was stupendous, as it represented a triangular²⁴, octagonal²⁵, *Fibonacci*²⁶, *Harshad*²⁷ and a *Motzkin*²⁸ number. But neither psychology nor theory of numbers could have prepared me for what twenty-one meant for her. Our relationship did not survive the seven-year itch. My coeval Sybil had just discovered she was not really into men.

In a week's time I will be twice as old than that ancient, pitiful version of myself, I realized. So why think of that ignoble time again? Did I fret the possibility of its return? Some singular things happened that year. It was the end of Amber's feline longevity. After a dry winter season, the month of April brought unbelievable snow. We witnessed a rare astronomical phenomenon—a total solar eclipse (if I happen to see the next one, I will be called a supercentenarian). It coincided with a complete blackout of my self-esteem. Yet I could find no other man to hate, but myself. At best, Sybil must have grown intolerant to some infinitesimal quirk of mine. At worst, I had been her Freudian lover, used and deemed germane.

At the age of twenty-one I was convinced that neither my mother nor my friends would let me live down the humiliation. There was something so mordant and sibylline in that incident from my youth. It turned into *stigmata*. It gave a tad of raw-chestnut-bitterness to everything I touched afterward—Mia included.

.....

Some passerby finally suggested that there was one place left to go—the animal shelter in the suburbia. It was late, and so I decided not to act upon that idea. *The shelter could not possibly stay open at this hour*, I thought, and decided it would be better to put the search on hold. And so, briefly after midnight, tired of spiraling the streets and parks of my city (and my memory lane), I gave up hope and went home.

As soon as I entered my apartment, it suddenly occurred to me that I should have checked the beagle's neck; what if there was some collar or a plate around it? Maybe, I thought, if I were lucky enough, I could find the owner's whereabouts. At first, I was

angry with myself for not having done this due diligence much earlier, but I quickly cast aside the self-criticism, by blaming it all on the vile wind, and on Anna/Joanna-induced havoc in my office.

I removed one of my gloves and quickly ran my fingers around the beagle's neck. Relieved to find a small chain, I turned on the tulip lamp (Mia's only possession I had decided to keep in the apartment), and closely examined the dog's collar. While I surely hadn't kept pace with the latest trends in the pet fashion industry, one look was enough to conclude that the pendant could not have been a typical dog accessory. What I was holding in my hand was an egg-shaped silver locket, with the symbol \aleph_0 engraved on it.

I was flabbergasted. My first thought was to check the authenticity of my experience, and so this time I *did* try to pluck a hair from my eyebrow. It hurt badly, so I ruled out the possibility of a dream. My second thought was *that* of having fallen prey to a prank by someone who knew me—maybe a friend, or a student—but then I realized I hadn't been very approachable (let alone friendly) for quite some time; moreover, my students were a little too old (and hopefully mature) to be indulging in jokes of that kind.

Now, if I were a writer, and if this were a novel rather than a faithful record of events and an embarrassing confession, *this* would be the place to elegantly insert a dialogue. *The other*, that significant companion of mine, would be excited about \aleph_0 just as much.

But there was no such person in my life, and I have no intention of fabricating one. I therefore plead with you to kindly accept the absence of any such dialogue.

For the purpose of clarity, it is perhaps appropriate to provide a brief explanation to the non-mathematical reader. So, dear math-averse, or math-inapt, or unconcerned-with-math, reader: I urge you to not close the covers of this book (or switch off the screen of your *e-reader*) just yet. I promise to be brief and painless; I ought to explain what \aleph_0 stands for, without the risk of losing, at once, at least half of my readership.

Let me begin by stating that (as you might already know) mathematically, every collection of well defined elements is called a set.

Cardinality is the number of elements in that set.

For example, all your lovers you are no longer with constitute the set of your failed relationships. In my case, it is a rather small set; I will call it A (for Alexander, obviously) and, using set notation, I will represent it in the form:

$$A = \{Sibyl, Mia\}.$$

The cardinality of the set A is thus 2.

Two may be a small number, but it is a symbolic one, even beyond the plaintiveness of my personal narrative. Remember that, in this world of duality, every set of opposites has cardinality two.

Some cardinal numbers, although very large, are still finite. For example, the set of all the fools who walk the Earth is undeniably large yet bound to have cardinality less than the total world population (which, by 2050, might just hit ten billion). In fact, researchers have estimated that the set of all humans who have ever lived on this Earth has cardinality of 108 billion. Therefore, the total number of fools in the human history remains—astonishingly—finite.

Of course, not all sets are finite. Take, for example, the counting numbers. Or the odd ones. Or the primes. Those are examples of infinite sets. Importantly, their elements can be ordered in a list.

A follower of any eastern spiritual tradition would be quick to provide an example far more salient than the mathematical abstractions above. Namely, one can simply consider the set of human desires, countable but endless, since the dawn of the human civilization.

So, what would the size of such an infinite set be? The German mathematician Georg Cantor (a man brave enough to ponder the madness of such an abstraction) chose to name the size of this infinity *aleph null* (\aleph_0), the smallest of all infinite cardinalities.

No, I really don't know if Cantor owned a dog.

And yes, in the world of mathematics, some infinities are different than other.

Of course, for this man made of dust, even the smallest, countable infinity is insurmountable. Suppose you started counting right now: one, two, three, four, ... How far a mulish person could go? Not at all far, I assure you.

Let us say that a man starts counting from the moment he was born—one number per second would be his speed—and he never stops counting till his very last breath. If we endow him with longevity— ninety nine would be his lifespan (I never liked the hundred, that ersatz symbol of completeness)—then, what do you think his last spoken number would be? Do nothing but trivial arithmetics to convince yourself that he could barely reach just above three billion!

What a wonderful place it is, that imaginary world of countable infinity! Have you heard of *Hotel Hilbert*, the imaginary hotel with infinitely many rooms? It is full, yet it can always accommodate one more guest. You ask how? Suppose you arrived at it, only to find out it was already full; do not fret, for the manager would not turn you down. She would tell each one of the infinitely many guests to move to the next room; the guest in room number one would then go to room number two, the one who was in room number two would move to room number three, and so on (guest in room number n would go to room number $n+1$), leaving the first room empty and available to you. As simple as that!

In a world of countable infinity everything is already full, yet it can always accommodate a new addition. For instance, an Alexandrian- \aleph_0 Library would have infinitely many books, all of them meticulously catalogued, without a single empty slot on each of the library's infinitely long shelves. Yet every time someone wrote a new book, a place would be provided for it. Alphabetically, the new book would take the order and the place of another one, but that would never be a problem; the displaced book (and all the consecutive ones) would be shifted one place further down the

catalogue and down the corresponding shelf, just like it is done in any other library. The only difference would be that the Alexandrian- \aleph_0 Library would never run out of space; the only inconvenience (if at all) would be that the titles of some of the new books would have to start running longer and longer! Citizens of such a society would be proud of their infinite knowledge, yet they would never grow paranoid upon the arrival of a new idea. For they would know very well that new ideas do not always have to replace the older ones, and that in the big library of the human intellectual evolution there is always enough room for another radical thought.

A mathematician typically struggles with the biblical doctrine of infinity. Just tell him that Hell is eternal or that God is infinite; *Precisely, which infinity are we talking about, what kind of an eternity?* he would be likely to ask.

Such a wealth of possibilities this infinity idea is! A mathematically sound theologian would bask in it, for it provides inspiration for such interesting eschatological discourses. For example, think of all the surplus of misery and suffering in this world, inflicted not by the powers of nature or by the physical laws of life, but by the humans driven by ignorance and greed. We can therefore assume that, at some infinitely distant point in time, this infinitely spacious Hell will become full.

But the Devil must be a mathematician, for he can always accommodate one more sinner in his Hall of thwarted warriors. Let's not question the premise that he is meticulous (The Devil is in the details, remember?), and we can therefore accept that his realm of torment is ordered and well-structured. Now, for the sake of simplicity, let us imagine that Hell is just like any other prison in which the inmates are given some sort of an ID—something like a clichéd striped uniform, with a number printed on the back. What happens when a newcomer reaches the gates of the Hell which is already filled to the brim?

Worry not, for Hell is a well-ordered system. The residents of the Hell are arranged in some sort of an array, a lattice, which can be used to induce a domino-like effect. All that the Devil needs to do is push in the back the sinner standing closest to the gate.

This would cause a chain reaction; each inmate would then mimic the Devil's action by doing the same to the person standing in front of them, and the entire lot will move, slowly but surely, deeper into the *Kingdom of Hell*.

The whole process would take infinitely long to complete—and the newcomer, too, would have to wait infinitely long to enter. But hey, what is time, once you are in Hell? Are not Heaven and Hell matters of eternity?

Of course, this model does not account for the complexity of a more realistic Hell, one consisting of various levels (like Dante's circles), but never mind—the aforementioned abstraction can easily be expanded, to accommodate for any variation in the Hell's architecture. In a nutshell: since each purgatory level is a subset of Inferno, the movement could be initiated at a level of a particular circle, rather than at the main Gate.

Now, it is important to know that there are infinities larger than the countable infinity. Take, for example, all the decimal numbers that exist between zero and one on the number line—those are far more than all the counting numbers taken to infinity. Thus the interval $(0,1)$ has cardinality larger than \aleph_0 . This cardinality is called *continuum*, and is denoted by c .

But there is no need to burden you with discussions on these higher infinities. It is enough for you to know that they do exist.

I used to tell Mia that I loved her *continuum*-much. She would smile and curl up in my arms. I never felt the need to ask her how much she loved me back. The fact that she was willing to listen about set theory, and that she actually understood the difference between \aleph_0 and c well enough to be able to appreciate this kind of mathematical wit, was all the proof of her love I ever needed. Instead of asking vanity questions, I would then silently hug her just a little bit tighter, and lose myself in the locks of her raven hair which coiled like a bundle of lemniscates, each an infinity in itself.

.....

A believer would say that whatever started unfolding in my life that winter night must have been an act of providence. A rationalist of my breed would replace the word *providence* by the word *probability*. Be it the former or the latter, destiny or chance, the locket named *infinity* cajoled the mathematician inside me. Whoever had named their dog \aleph_0 was neither math-ignorant nor a philistine, and thus certainly worth my attention. The man who tried to balance the *continuum* of the life in his hand with the *countability* of the coins in his pocket, could not have chosen a more discrete name for his dog, nor a messier man to become its temporary custodian.

▷ *The Shelter*

Have you ever tried to abandon a dog? The first time I tried the get-rid-of-the-dog strategy, it didn't go well. The morning after I had left \aleph_0 in the snow, at the corner of the busiest city street (for the love of God, spare me the reprimand!), I found him wedged and shivering at my front door. I spent the following evening trying to pass him on to someone else the same way he had been given to me, only to end up carrying a bag full of roasted chestnuts, candy canes and sugar coated nuts in one hand, and \aleph_0 happily lulled in the other. Left with no other choice, one morning I took the stranger's advice and located the animal shelter in the suburbia.

What a character, I remember thinking, as I greeted the person in charge of the animals. Undoubtedly eighty and unmistakably arthritic, he was a strikingly tall man next to whom I looked like a pigmy. Bald yet dandyish, he fashioned grey shaggy mustaches which slumped over his mouth.

'I'll take him,' he said, curiously examining the beagle, as if participating in some kind of an auction. 'But I am afraid I have to ask you for a favor.'

'I didn't know that the admission of a stray dog to a shelter would be conditional on my willingness to reciprocate a personal favor,' I shook off his temerity. I was tired, edgy, and desperate to get rid of the beagle, yet a bribe sounded like a crazy idea.

'Oh, but it isn't exactly personal,' he rebutted with a pseudo smile, 'unless...the stray dog isn't exactly stray, and the person who brings it to me isn't a designated dogcatcher.'

'What a nonsense,' I retorted. 'This isn't my dog. You know what...I will leave him right here, and we will pretend that we've never had this awkward conversation.'

I placed the confused puppy next to the man's tripod stool, and walked away without even bothering to turn back.

I am certain the obdurate oldie must have laughed at my anger and unworldliness, for that same night № found its way back to my home, all the way from the animal shelter in the suburbia.

I was exhausted, yet I wrestled with insomnia. I thought that filling Amber's old bowl with canned puppy food was a temporary arrangement. Earlier that day I even removed, from the corner of my bedroom, the improvised pet bed made of four puffy pillows.

And yet I couldn't deny a subtle sense of thrill for having felt, once again, № by my side.

.....

I had no other choice but to visit the shelter again.

'What can I do for you?' I asked, this time acting spuriously polite. I kept my eyes away from that odious man, doing everything I could to minimize the chance of an outburst. I could not bear see him indulge in my (literally overnight) capitulation.

To my surprise, he did not crow over my defeat. Instead, he put down the oversized bowl he had been filling with pieces of leftover food and, supporting himself with an oversized cane (more of a shepherd's stick), he slowly stood up from the tripod. Against the dimmed lights in the cabin, his thin and tall silhouette resembled a portrait of an emaciated orthodox saint in a Byzantine fresco.

He walked towards a worn off wooden cupboard awkwardly placed in the corner of the otherwise empty shack, opened its screeching doors, and pulled out a pair of simple, old, brown-leathered boots.

'If you could take these to a cobbler,' he placed his unadorned demand, 'my feet will be safe. The season has changed, and I am still wearing loafers.'

Imagine that! I thought, struggling to suppress my chagrin. There was no way I would accept to be treated like his assistant, or have anything to do with his reeking boots. I took my wallet out, and straightforwardly asked, 'How much would be enough for a new pair?'

He waved off my offer with a humiliating hand gesture.

'Had I needed money,' he said, 'I would have asked directly. Neither do I mince my words nor do I want new boots; I want these ones, mended. Just get their soles done by a cobbler, and you can consider yourself dog-less again.'

I stood there, carrying an endearing puppy in one hand, and a pair of stinky old boots in the other. Any normal person would have discarded my dilemma as a no-brainer; but I had strayed away from the state of normalcy long ago. I was ready to accept the challenge. I scrambled the shelter, feeling undaunted.

Oh, how oblivious I was, to the absurdity of the deal!

I have read somewhere that the *Parsis*, the followers of the teachings of *Zarathustra*, always brought a dog to a dying man, to smell the scent of death and take the edge off the passage, before the body was carried to the *Tower of Silence*. The dog in my custody, brought to me without consent, quietly stared at me. Was he trying to ascertain if I were still alive? Did he somehow know I was clinging onto some figmental hope for a meaning in this life? I quivered at the thought. Those images, dug out from the pits of my subconscious, made the whole experience even less tolerable.

.....

As soon as I reached home I knocked at the door of my neighbor, madam Paula. Although she and my mother had been friends since childhood, I thought Paula was everything that my mother could never be. In company of others, my verbally chary mother despised Paula's effusive nature. Big-hearted in all her affairs, Paula often irked my mother otherwise well-known for her bent towards stinginess. Married and divorced thrice, Paula never succumbed to misandry—on the contrary, she savored a self-

depreciating sense of humor and claimed she was technically still married, alluding to her latest husband who had eloped years ago without formally filing for a divorce. Unlike Paula, my mother was once infatuated, and never married. To my despair, till her very end, she remained a prisoner of the *what-will-people-say* mentality.

‘Poor thing, it will freeze out there,’ Paula disapproved of the way I was handling the wrapped-in-a-woolen-shawl puppy in my hands. Under the pretext of being a long one, I did not share the story of how I became a custodian of a small dog. I confidently stated that I was dealing with a temporary arrangement.

‘Why don’t you come in,’ she took me by the arm and led me in. Her interest in others—humans and animals alike—was candid, but never cloying. As soon as I entered Paula’s living room and placed \aleph_0 on the felted fleece rug, she stopped paying any attention to him.

‘Come, dear,’ she invited me to her kitchen, ‘let us have a cup of coffee.’

Now, let me be clear—I abhor small talk, but I do not like being impolite either. I thanked Paula and readily answered a few of her inquiries into my health, my work at the Institute, and my (lack of a meaningful) love life.

‘Well, dear, perhaps it is time to let go of her,’ she finally said. ‘If it were for another man, there would still be some hope. One often repents a meaningless affair. My Jacob, too, must have considered coming back; but having sneaked away without a word, he must be feeling too embarrassed to ask for forgiveness,’ she chuckled, referring to the bastard I never really liked.

Paula had a heart made of some different matter, receptive to the vibes of others. She deliberately omitted a direct mention of Sybil and of the way I had lost her two decades ago. I knew, and so did Paula (surely better than me), that one’s love life is a *continuum*, rather than a clutter of makeshift relationships. She must have sensed, all over me, the smell of an old wound.

‘This is totally different,’ she chose to be allusive. ‘Mia did not leave you for someone else. You cannot compete with God, can you?’ she added with a twitch in her eyebrow, which was meant to complement the wisdom of her statement.

‘You are right, auntie Paula,’ I replied patiently, knowing well her intentions were benign. ‘*I cannot win against God,*’ I agreed, taking my last sip of coffee. I was ready to leave. To keep talking about the woman who had left me a month (precisely thirty-three days) earlier, determined to join a monastic order, was in no way going to help fix the disarray in my mind.

‘There is one thing I wanted to ask you,’ I said, as I picked up the puppy. ‘I need a cobbler. Do you happen to know of anyone nearby?’

‘My oh my,’ she laughed. ‘Why would you need any? Go buy yourself a new pair of shoes. Your birthday is coming soon, they’ll be on me!’

Paula must have judged my question as a clumsy attempt to change the topic. I, on the other hand, tried to justify my strange request by making up a story; I said a colleague of mine had just bought a pair of vintage, crocodile-leather boots from a local antique-shop. ‘He got a good deal,’ I added, trying to sound convincing. The catch was, I said, in the soles—they were worn off, but it would take very little to fix them. I was just trying to be helpful.

‘Good luck with that, my dear,’ Paula couldn’t stop laughing. ‘It must have been five, maybe ten years, since I last saw a cobbler in this town. But what do I know—you are a young dude, go and *Google* it up! Give it a go, you might excavate some fossilized cobbler where you least expect to find one. But I am sure you will not find a cobbler downtown.’

Ironically, I received this advice from a sexagenarian who always refused to subscribe to the idea of using a mobile phone or the Internet. Even after my mother became obsessed with her first smart phone, Paula insisted she would not become an addict to objects capable of replacing a normal human interaction by quasi-communication.

‘One more thing, Alexander,’ Paula shouted as I unlocked the door to my apartment located at the other end of the hall. ‘How about reconsidering your circle of friends? Men in crocodile boots! Where on earth do you find such people?’

‘He is a fine man, just a colleague of mine. Have a good day, aunt Paula,’ I shouted back, embarrassed of my construct.

Following her advice, as soon as I entered my apartment I opened my laptop and did an online search for city cobblers. What I found was a recipe for a peach cobbler, and the opening hours of a restaurant which had apple cobbler on its menu. A used-book store had catalogued some self-help book titled *The Greatest Cobbler in the World*. Then, there was this business consultant who offered his services to small and medium size enterprises using the catch-phrase *I can help your company avoid the barefoot cobbler’s children syndrome*. I almost exalted upon tracing a shoe-repair shop in the area not far from the university campus; alas, it turned out it had been closed for well over a year. I realized that the mentality of opulent consumerism had swiftly swept over the art of making good things last longer.

Aleph Null seemed cozy on my recliner chair, and didn’t seem to bother about my repeated inspection of his silver pendant. I suddenly realized that I hadn’t yet tried to open his small locket.

I took it and carefully inspected it. On the back of the pendant, in tiny letters visible only under a magnifying glass (which, again, I had to borrow from Paula), the following verses were etched:

IF GOD IS ONE, THEN MAN IS LIKE A $0.\overline{9}$

—HE *IS THERE*, WITHOUT EVEN KNOWING IT.

HE NEEDS TO CROSS AN INFINITE OCEAN OF REPETITIVENESS

BEFORE HE REALIZES HE *IS*, ALREADY, ONE WITH THE ONE.

I pressed the locket, and it wide opened. A small key (no larger than that on a lock-and-key diary) fell into my palm. I had no idea what it was for, nor what I would do with it.

I never subscribed to the idea that only mathematics is capable of proving (or disproving) the existence of God. Yet someone spoke to me of both the sacred and the mundane—of both God and a dog—in the language and symbols I was most fond of.

If you—just like me—chortled with delight over the freshness of those verses written on the collar of the puppy named \aleph_0 , I declare you not just a reader of my *bona fide* chronicle of self-discovery, but as a dear intellectual companion of mine.

However, If you are math-averse, or math-inapt, or unconcerned-with-math reader, and yet generous and persistent enough to have stayed with me even after my set-cardinality exposé, I owe you one more elucidation before we could move on.

The number $0.\overline{9}$ (written with a *vinculum* above the digit 9) is called a repeating or a recurring decimal; it stands for $0.99999\dots$, a zero followed by a *never-ending* string of nines after the decimal point. If you have never studied infinite series, or if your high-school teacher couldn't have cared less for your overall math literacy, then you have probably never had a chance to properly understand the convergence of this infinite sum. But fret not, for there is a simple, elementary and rather *intuitive* way of looking at it, *without* applying any advanced concepts of convergence and limit.

Let $x = 0.999\dots$

Multiplying by ten, you get:

$$\begin{aligned} 10x &= 9.999\dots \\ &= 9 + 0.999\dots \\ &= 9 + x \end{aligned}$$

$$\begin{aligned} 10x - x &= 9 \\ 9x &= 9 \\ x &= 1 \end{aligned}$$

It is that simple. Yes, zero followed by infinitely many nines equals one. This is not a glitch, nor a sophism. The number *one* has, indeed, two distinct representations—one

short, and the other one infinitely repetitive. Yet one is one, no matter how you decide to go about it.

Indeed, nothing would be more affirmative of my pedagogic competences (nor more gratifying to my academic ego) than your ability to appreciate those verses. Do not dismiss them, at once, as if they were some abstruse mathematical statements or arcane metaphysical nonsense.

✧ *The Spirit Cobbler*

It wasn't the time to give up just yet. I surprised myself with the sort of determination that made me wake up before seven on a weekend day. It was Saturday, and my mother's favorite flea market was open. On weekends, she and Paula used to spend hours there. If, by any chance, a cobbler stuck around that area, Paula should have known. Yet I conveniently discarded that certainty, under the pretext that my neighbor's primary interest had always been in crystals and pieces of vintage jewelry, rather than in footwear.

On my way to the market I made sure to check the street poles and walls for any 'lost dog' poster or announcement. I thought the owners would have tried to find their pet with a vigor if not stronger, then at least tantamount to mine; yet there was no sign of anyone rooting around for a puppy.

It wasn't difficult to understand the addictiveness of the flea market. It smelled of sweet nostalgia, yet absolutely free from a wistful vibe. I felt like a child sneaking into an attic, curious to explore boxes of stored memorabilia belonging to those were once children. I saw plenty of tribal-art pottery, handmade bottle openers and photo frames, strings of agate, amethyst and malachite beads, wooden sets of *mensch ärgere dich nicht*²⁹ and other board games, books, outgrown baby clothes and porcelain toys. I even discovered a medieval-looking candle holder, decorated with grotesque *incubi* and *succubi*³⁰, which I thought would have been a perfect gift for the man who was once my best friend, but whom I no longer wished to see.

Flare horns of vintage phonographs bloomed everywhere, like trumpet flowers in a spring garden. In the dark depths of my mind those horns elongated, stretched their necks to infinity, and turned into replicas of *Gabriel's horn*³¹. When the time comes, the angel will wrap his hands around this infinitely long horn, and blow through it a finite

volume of air, to announce *The Judgement Day*. Mia will be saved, unlike her nihilist ex-lover.

Both the women I have loved jilted me. Then a janitor by the name of Anna (or was it Joanna?) in one go stripped me off the workaholic cliché excuse—I could no longer bury in work any of my troubled thoughts. Instead, a dog entered my life, uninvited and determined to stay.

‘Would you like to buy one of these?’—a man behind a stall offered me a phonograph. ‘If you are interested, I will add a nice set of old LP records for free.’

‘Oh no,’ I replied, apologizing for no reason. Unconvincingly polite, I quickly threw in another excuse, ‘These are absolutely phenomenal,’ I said, ‘but I am not really looking for a phonograph.’

The man nodded kindly, seemingly unaffected by my lack of interest in his antiques, and quickly redirected his focus to the book in his hands.

‘May I ask—I hope you don’t mind,’ I grabbed the chance while he was still adjusting his half-rimmed glasses which had slid down his nose, ‘but do you happen to know of any shoe-repair shop nearby?’

His reply was better than expected.

‘Not really,’ he said. ‘But I know a cobbler. Well, he is not a commercial shoe-repairer. The man has a small workshop in the cellar of his house, and he seems to be enjoying the craft as a distraction from his routine job. Everyone I know gets their soles and rubber heels repaired there.’

‘Could you please share his address?’

‘That’s the thing,’ he hesitated, all the while rubbing his chin. ‘It is not a shop, but a private house. If you just showed up at his door, he would probably turn you down. But if you have no other option, then come back at five. His house is on my way back home. I could, perhaps, introduce you.’

My problem suddenly appeared smaller. 'I'll be back at five,' I said firmly, and thanked him again. His face quickly disappeared behind the string of flaring brass horns.

For an obvious reason, in the idleness of those hours before five, I recalled the *Hasidic* tale about *Enoch*, the righteous cobbler, who gracefully transcended the ordinary task of fixing a sole to a shoe into a spiritual practice of binding together Heaven and Earth. I had nothing of Enoch's simplicity nor faith, and thus the forces guarding my life remained hopelessly juxtaposed.

But then again, not every cobbler is *Enoch*, and not every pair of crocodile-leathered boots is owned by a nobleman.

.....

In my late teens and early twenties my mind toiled to decipher the psychological underpinning of curious legends and fairytales. This hobby counterbalanced my academic devotion to a fundamental science, preventing my right brain from withering up. Much to my disappointment, my inclination toward numbers, logic and structure, more often than not, presided over any attempt of circumventing the rational mind. My proclivity for mathematical thinking had already outdone the plasticity of those synapses in my brain responsible for art and intuition.

The harder-to-deal-with truth was my ineptness at applying anything I had ever learned towards the betterment of my own state. Throughout my life, I always resembled a lettered therapist, cerebral in dissecting the nightmares of his patients, but utterly impotent in facing his own ogres.

Back in my student days I had a roommate, a scholar of cultural anthropology. His parents were immigrants from the Balkans, and in spite of the fact that he had left his native place at the age of five, he was still remarkably fond of the inherited language, music and customs of his fatherland (his own reference to his country of birth). He was particularly proud of his name, Vuk, which no one ever pronounced correctly; the vowel was to be read neither like 'u' in 'cut' nor like 'u' in 'cute', but rather like 'u' in 'put'.

He said his name meant a wolf, and that he believed it was a faithful representation of his innate nature. ‘You mean to say that you are just like that wolf in Red Riding Hood,’ I teased him, always benignly. For a long time, I did not sense a chthonic or lycanthropic facet of his personality, even though his fantastic storytelling somehow always contained a rare amalgam of darkness and predestined fluke.

Vuk once told me a hauntingly beautiful folktale about a *tzar* and his army who rode their horses the end of the world. It was a land of darkness, that newly discovered territory, where absolutely nothing was visible to the eye. The *tzar* wanted to explore this unknown place. He knew, though, that once they surrendered to the darkness, they would not be able to find their way out.

‘Had he been chaperoned by a wolf, the *tzar* would have had nothing to worry about—the canine’s glowing eyes would have pierced through the darkest night.’ Vuk never missed a chance to emphasize canine attributes of such kind.

The ingenious *tzar* was not willing to give up the idea of entering this dark land. Standing at the edge between the two worlds, he finally found a solution. He separated the mares from the foals, and took along only the youngsters. He trusted the motherly instinct of the mares to find the foals no matter the difficulty. Once the mares find their youngsters, he thought, they would pull them all out, back into the light of the known world.

Dismounting their horses, the *tzar* and his soldiers walked inside a dark cave. It did not take long before some strange stones started pricking their feet.

Suddenly, from the depth of the cave, a voice echoed:

Take none, and you will regret; take some, and you will still regret.

Some men got scared, and didn’t dare take any stone. Others, thinking that they would regret anyway, decided to take the risk and grab a few. Upon leaving the cave and this dark land at the margins of the world, the soldiers re-entered the ordinary land, and in the light of the day, saw that the stones in their hands were, in fact, precious gems.

Those who hadn't taken any, regretted dearly. Those who'd taken some, regretted for not having taken more.

For days, Vuk and I argued about the meaning of the story. We dissected it as an initiation parable, a rite of passage through the dark womb of the earth. We agreed that darkness meant the unknown, which did not always had to be a chamber of the evil. We acknowledged the dark abyss which conquerers like Alexander the Great had to face at the margins of their ever-expanding empires. We saw the promise of unimaginable riches which kept pulling those heroes forward, despite all danger. We acknowledged that fortune favored the brave. We admired the cunningness and criticized the brutality of the *tzar's* intellect to separate the baby horses from their mothers. Finally, we laughed at the inferiority of the man who always relies on his five senses, even where instinct and intuition are superior. We argued that, while fear was to be credited for the *tzar's* creative way out, it was, altogether, a futile emotion. There was no real danger, only a reward, which then so foolishly turned sour.

My social conditioning and, perhaps, my existentialist mindset, made me draw a parallel with Kierkegaard's famous '*Do it or do not do it—you will regret both.*' And then I found one more iteration of the same idea in the words of Lorenzo Dow: '*You will be damned if you do — And you will be damned if you don't.*'

Vuk expressly dismissed my remark. 'Not at all,' he argued. 'This story is not about the futility and regret of all life decisions. Don't you see? Those who took a few stones were still better off than those who didn't. This is a tale of hope, of light at the fringes of your known world. It is dark there, and you may not come out of it alive—unless you harness some sort of an innate strength. That strength, that power within you, can be your survival instinct (*tzar's* mules), or your intellect (Hansel and Gretel's trail of crumbs and pebbles), or a soulmate's anchoring love (Ariadne's thread given to Theseus to navigate through the labyrinth). If you come out alive after a dark night of the soul, If you manage to get through it unharmed, you'll find a couple of diamonds in your hand. And not only that—if you are honest enough, you'll admit to yourself and you'll

admit to the existence that you had been too foolish and too afraid. You would see that, had you persisted longer during those days of darkness, your reward could have been even higher.'

We finally agreed that the voice from the cave—that dark, poignant and disturbing invitation to choose between acting and non-acting—spoke directly to the human ego. That insatiable ego is utterly risk averse, yet it never ceases to demand more.

My darkness never concealed diamonds. It was, in all its essence, an absolute absence of light. I sometimes miss that callow Alexander, who thought melancholy could be graceful, and Vuk's story manifestable. The few precious things that *did* manifest almost miraculously in my life, never lasted long.

.....

'I recognize those boots!' the man behind the arch-fitter machine elongated his neck, scanned me from head to toe over a pair of thick glasses, and with a surly lack of interest pressed down the handle of his machine. He was, without a doubt, exceptionally deft at moulding shoe arches. I remember standing there in the middle of the packed little workshop, holding those boots in my hand, and feeling awkward. The room was some sort of a museum in itself, harboring items of forgotten names and of peculiar use. While I could recognize a sewing machine, pliers, hammers and needles of all sizes, some of the iron cast tools and machines ominously resembled instruments of torture.

No Enoch would be skilled enough to bind in harmony that cobbler's world with mine.

'Will you be able to fix the soles?' I faltered, having ignored his welcoming remark.

'It is never a question of ability, but willingness,' he answered back.

I felt the blood rush to my face, and a sudden spasm in my leg. I briefly held onto the doorknob, waiting for the contraction to stop, indecisive whether I should just hurl those boots in the corner of the room, and leave at once.

The cobbler looked at me over his glasses again, and intercepted me with an obscure comment.

‘That’s exactly what *he* expects you to do,’ he said. ‘Do you really want to quit and give him a chance to gloat?’

I turned around, surprised by the question and the odd silence in the room. The cramp was sharp, and it must have also shown on my face. I stood there, stiff and wordless.

‘Old Theo, of course,’ the cobbler continued. ‘The man who lives with the dogs. He is the one who sent you, isn’t he?’

It is such a small world, I thought. But then again, this is not such a small city, so that everyone knew a dog-keeper and a cobbler. I must be growing paranoid.

‘Look, I do not know what he lured you with, nor the glue with which he keeps you fastened. But rest assured, if he has given you a task, you will not be able to walk out before you complete it.’

‘Do you really know him?’ My wariness receded.

The cobbler just smiled. He suddenly appeared much friendlier.

‘I told you I have seen those boots. I guess you wish you had never met their owner,’ he replied. ‘But don’t try to refold the scroll. Complete what you have started.’

‘Do you mean to say you’ll fix these for me?’ I brought the boots forward, and placed them on the large wooden desk.

‘This must be one of his tests,’ he replied. ‘It could have easily turned into an impossible task, had you not found me. But tell me first, will you be able to pay?’

‘It is not a matter of ability, but willingness,’ I riposted.

‘Ah, all right then’ he said calmly. ‘If that is the case, then come back tomorrow morning. The boots will be ready, and we will set a fair price.’

R *The Second Cosmic Unit of Time*

As I walked back home, hands buried in pockets and fingers fidgeting with a couple of coins, the first soggy snowflakes descended on my glasses, skewing my already short-sighted visual field. Within minutes, the evening sky turned all white; it was the kind of whiteness that lulls the mind into heedlessness. By the time I reached my building, the snow already claimed the streets of the city, announcing a long and icy winter.

I was not in a mood to cook, so I ordered some light dinner from the restaurant across the street. I spent an hour nestled in my snug sofa by the window, curtains wide open, with a bottle of wine on the table, a pile of books on the floor, and a small dog on the cushion right next to me. All noisiness from people and traffic slowly lessened, and a comfortable silence set in.

Madam Paula rang my door to ask me if I have had any success in finding a cobbler to fix my friend's boots. I knew her inquiry was just an excuse to strike up a conversation. My mother's death a year earlier was a big shock for Paula; in spite of their seemingly incompatible characters, the two of them somehow remained close till the end.

I invited Paula for a glass of wine and a game of cards. She readily accepted my invitation. I saw, however, a hint of hesitation in her eyes, when I said we should play our good old *Tablanette*.

'Hmm, let's play rummy instead of that game of yours,' she proposed.

'What fun would that be?' I persisted.

'Stubborn as always,' she replied with a gentle rebuke. I knew she thought I was being masochistic. The origin of *Tablanette* in my life was no secret to her.

.....

‘As a mathematician, you must be amazing at poker, no?’ People would often ask me.

To this overworked question, thrown at me at least a hundred times at all sorts of social gatherings, I had a ready-made reply: ‘Don’t ask,’ I would retort. ‘I am such a carnivore. But I’d like to know—do *you* play *Tablanette*?’

No one ever said they did, and so no offense was ever taken on account of my malice.

It was Vuk to whom I owed this spiteful reply. Many years ago he taught me this card game of risibly simple rules and a deceptively elegant name. The game was yet another item in his endless repertoire of ethnocultural heritage from the Balkans.

The rules of *Tablanette* are fit for a seven-year-old. From a standard pack of 52 cards, each player is dealt six (in batches of three), and then four more cards are placed on the table, face up.

The numerical value attributed to each card is as follows: $J = 12$, $Q = 13$, $K = 14$, and the cards 2–10 retain their face value. $A = 1$ or 11, depending on the context. For example, the sum of A and 2 can be equal to either 3 or 13 (Q), and each player decides how to treat it, depending on the cards held in hand.

The first person to play checks if he holds in hand either a card of the same rank or a card whose numerical value is a sum of two or more of the cards from the table layout. In this favorable case, the player can claim those cards, placing aside both the card played and the card(s) collected. If the player does not have any such card, he has to place on the table any one of the cards he holds in hand. Then the next person plays according to the same rules. When the players run out of all six cards, they are once again dealt with another six, and this repeats until all the cards from the deck are exhausted. The goal of the game is to capture many high-stake cards.

Many times I asked Vuk why he insisted we played that ridiculous game. ‘It is pointless and infantile,’ I complained. To that, he always replied, ‘We play it so that, every once in a while, you stop being so smart and serious.’

One night he suggested we slightly altered the rules of the game.

‘What difference would it make?’ I muttered, and readily agreed to do as he pleased.

‘The new goal of the game will be to minimize one’s own score,’ he said.

I thought this suggestion didn’t make sense.

‘Who plays this way?’ I objected.

‘Just give it a try,’ he said.

I sulked.

‘Back in my fatherland,’ he said, ‘there is a village where people used to have an annual donkey race. The winner is the one whose donkey reaches last.’

‘It does not sound like a novel concept,’ I smugly retorted. ‘It is a version of that Gestalt story with camels racing through the desert. As long as everyone rides someone else’s camel, there will be a winner, er...a loser. I guess that’s the caveat in your donkey race, right?’

He nodded.

‘But in *my* version of *Tablanette*,’ he said, ‘you don’t play another man’s cards; with *your* cards in your hand, you need to let the other be a better player.’

At first, losing such a game sounded like an easy task. Surely, you know how to let a child or a grandma win a game of cards. But when two equally strong players share the same goal, the duel becomes an intriguingly galant competition in selflessness. Since both the parties delay claiming any cards, at a certain point the table gets covered in so many cards that, whichever combination one holds in hand, playing dumb is no longer possible. One of the player is doomed to claim at least a few points. It suddenly becomes *too difficult to lose*.

It doesn’t take long before losing, too, becomes a matter of prestige.

‘Competition is so inherent to our nature,’ Vuk said triumphantly, ‘that we quickly adjust to these new rules. We find it easy to compete in losing, too. One willingly

becomes an also-ran, if that's what it takes to be acclaimed. You see where I am going with this?'

'There is egotism masqueraded as modesty and self-denial' I responded.

'Yes, in certain contexts—the greatest donor, the greatest ascetic, the greatest loser. Competition remains the underlying principle. It is not only difficult to be the best—it is perhaps even harder to become the worst among those who have renounced.'

'Renounced what?' I asked.

'Anything,' he replied. 'Some renounce their community or the society at large. Others renounce a system of values or a moral code. There are people who renounce any ambition or a desire for material success. Finally, one can renounce the body as a source of suffering.'

'What exactly are you saying, then?'

'Join any of those tribes of austerity seekers,' he said, 'and I assure you—you will never succeed to become the greatest denouncer among them all.'

It would take me more than two decades to fully buy into his words. Only after I was ready to put at stake everything I had; only after I left my home, my career and my name behind, could I finally taste that sweetness of becoming nobody.

And at that moment, in that sweetness, I was even further away from truth than ever before.

.....

Paula and I played seven rounds of *Tablanette* before we agreed to stop. As always, I let Paula win. At about ten o'clock, she said it was time to call it a day, gave me a kiss, and left.

That night was some sort of a solitary retreat before the paradoxical events which lay in wait started unfolding themselves.

.....

That night the blizzard determined the price I was to pay for having Theo's boots repaired. The next day I spent solid two hours with the shovel in my hands, removing piles of fresh snow from the front door and the backyard of the cobbler's house.

'It would have been much better—for both of us—if I just paid cash for your service, don't you think?' I enquired, even though I suspected his response.

'Well,' the cobbler replied with a trace of smile on his eccentrically fleshy lips, 'I am not a service provider. You came to me in time of need, and I didn't turn you away. Isn't it only fair to repay with some goodwill?'

I thrust the shovel into the snow, leaned my elbow over its handle, and replied only after having taken a deep breath in.

'I would be more than happy to barter for your favor,' I said, looking at the heap of already scooped snow. 'But there is a catch to this arrangement. You are a master of the skill, a cobbler par excellence. I, on the other hand, have no experience whatsoever, in shoveling snow.'

'But of course,' he finally laughed out loud, dismissing my lousy attempt at bribing him with a compliment. 'That is why you've been working for two hours now, while I barely needed fifteen minutes to fix those old boots!'

The anger I felt upon hearing that remark convinced me in the foolishness of everything I had done over the past few days. But I had already fallen prey to the sunk cost fallacy, so I managed to bite my tongue and complete the remaining work.

It was snowing continuously, and I felt pain in both my back and knees, probably a result of the bad posture I assumed during the shoveling. 'You see, I am much older than you,' the cobbler wouldn't quit rubbing salt into the wound. 'Scooping snow in this weather could have been fatal for my heart.'

As if you had one! Neither you nor that old rogue at the animal shelter are worth of anyone's kindness, I thought, but somehow managed to bite my tongue. I wondered if he deserved anything but a slapdash service from me.

When I was finally done, ready to pick up the old man's boots and leave, the cobbler threw his final, unbidden remark which, at that time, I didn't fully understand.

'It must have been but a moment of carelessness that costs you all this trouble with Theo and me. Many things in life—some pleasant, other abysmal—are born out of such heedless states of mind.'

My eyes must have given away the *I-couldn't-care-less* consideration for his words.

He sent me off with a gentle smile and a cynical remark. 'It's better this way,' he said. 'The sooner you see, the less grief you'll stash under your cloak of pseudo confidence.'

Unwilling to acknowledge any concern about his words, and quite certain I had already requited his favor with my surplus labor, I asked for a permission to enter the workshop and collect the boots before leaving. He looked at me with a dismissive expression of a *know-it-all* father of a rebellious adolescent, stating he would rather stay out and enjoy the sight of a well-shoveled yard than accompany me.

I shook the snow off my hair, coat and boots, crossed the entrance corridor leading toward the house, took the stairs down to the cellar, and reached the heavy, iron door of the cobbler's hobby room. With no intention of delaying any further, I threw a quick look at the paraphernalia scattered around the workshop. I easily recognized Theo's boots placed on one of the shelves of an old, decaying teakwood cupboard. I picked them up and threw them inside a large plastic bag.

Just as I was about to leave, my eyes wandered towards the bottom of the cupboard. They caught the sight of an unusually small drawer, which seemed almost out of place — its lock, too, was unusually tiny. Indeed, the devil is in the details. Before the last snowflake trapped in the pleats of my shawl melted, a thought crossed my mind. *Would No's strange little key fit in? Why am I even assessing this possibility? Even if I find the*

beagle's real owner—that urban juggler of dogs and coins—would I dare discuss any of the locket's content with him? Besides, Theo will soon take his stupid boots, and №₀ will find his place in the shelter. Perhaps this is all just a big, messy coincidence.

And I would have left, had I upheld my integrity; but an unfamiliar urge to engage in roguery suddenly tickled my imagination, determined to probe my social graces. The moment I noticed the blisters on my palm—courtesy of my ravening host—I quickly dismissed any feeling of guilt, reached out for the key hidden on the bottom of my jeans' pocket, and rushed towards the lock. I was determined to satisfy my curiosity before the cobbler grew suspicious of my tardiness.

The Lilliputian keyhole turned out a perfect match to the key I held in my hand and, two tiny bolts later, the shelf got open. To say I was perplexed would be an insincere understatement; much like a lifespan flashes before the eyes of a dying man, in a matter of a few seconds an entire menagerie of suspicions and conspiracies managed to gallop across my mind. Frankly, not much of it made good sense, and so I thought it would be prudent to think of the keyhole as a case of a mere coincidence.

After all, it was a matter of sound reasoning to assume that certain pieces of furniture were popular in a particular locality. I refused to be blinded by a bias, and to reject the possibility that a cobbler and a maths-savvy owner of №₀ could share a taste for teakwood cupboards. However, the mystery of why two identical cupboards would also have to have identical locks somehow managed to slip through the weakened blades of my rational scrutiny.

I opened the drawer slowly. In it there was nothing but a folded piece of paper. I hesitated for no longer than a blink of an eye, took it out without looking into its content, slid it in the pocket of my coat, pushed the squeaky drawer back, and quickly locked it. I realized I was sweating on a freezing day. When I came outside the house, I found the cobbler still standing in the garden and admiring the good work I had done

(yet unwilling to admit he was impressed). I told him I was ready to leave, to which he nodded, indifferently.

‘Do you, by any chance, own a dog?’ I asked, not quite sure why.

‘A dog? No! Do I look like someone who needs extra physical activity, such as dog walking? That too, in winter! Why are you asking?’

‘For no particular reason,’ I replied. ‘It just crossed my mind that spacious houses like yours usually have one.’

.....

Did I become a thief that day? I don’t know, for I felt fully entitled to that piece of paper. Let us be clear—for no fault of mine, I somehow got bogged down with all that nonsense. Thus a small indiscretion from my side was the least I could claim.

№₀ seemed genuinely happy to see me come home again. I gave him food and spent some time doing nothing but watch him eat. There is something utterly contenting in the sight of a small dog emptying a large food tray.

I felt hungry, too. I quickly prepared a rye bread sandwich, topped with whatever I could find in my fridge. I carried the plate into the living room, snuggled up on my sofa, and unfolded the cobbler’s piece of paper. It was still somewhat moist from the snow. Its content was a love poem of sorts.

*Imagine you and I were eternal—
A Goddess and a God capable of miracles,
Standing as one at the beginning of time.*

*Every time you kiss me, a world is created.
Every time I kiss you, a world vanishes.
When we kiss, time stops again.
Between two kisses, time continues to flow.*

*You kiss me first, for your breath ruptures with creativity.
One kiss, and a universe is brought to life—
A perfect world full of beauty and pain.*

*Wait, I whisper—another universe would be one too many.
I kiss you back, and the world vanishes.
Once again we are all alone, just you and me.*

*It took one cosmic unit of time for you to kiss me
And just half of that time, for me to kiss you back.
And a half of that half for you to kiss me again.*

*We take infinitely many turns:
Who can tell if this game is one of lust or a brawl?
Each kiss betides twice faster than the last.*

*When the clock strikes the second cosmic unit of time
Who'll be the winner between the two of us?
If you kiss me last, I promise we'll be dancing through a multiverse
If I kiss you last, then everything will fall into oblivion— even this eternal love.*

In those verses I saw the never-ending play of attraction and antagonism between *Him* and *Her*. I recognized the cosmic cycle of creation, destruction, and renewal. Passion and hate in multitudes. And there was, of course, the calculus of infinite series and an adaptation of a well-known mathematical paradox³². What a mathematician (and a tad of a philosopher) saw in those verses, was the following expression which sums up the time spent in-between all those kisses:

1 cosmic unit of time (before *Her* first kiss) +
1/2 cosmic unit of time (before *He* kisses her back) +
1/4 cosmic unit of time (before *She* kisses him again) +
1/8 cosmic unit of time (before *He* kisses her again) + ...

Leave kisses out of it, for they do not consume any cosmic time (remember, time stops when they kiss—this is at least one shared thing which makes mortals and Gods alike). Therefore, the total flow of cosmic time since *The Beginning of Time* is:

$$\text{Total Time} = 1 + \frac{1}{2} + \frac{1}{4} + \frac{1}{8} + \frac{1}{16} + \dots$$

This is simple math. The sum of this infinite series is equal to 2.

It is for this reason that God asks his Goddess about the state of affairs two cosmic units of time later. They need to exchange an infinite number of kisses before the clock strikes two; but there is no way of saying who the last kiss belongs to, for who can tell what stands at the end of an infinite sequence?

It is clever and it is wise; it is proper and it is right. There shouldn't be a winner in the game of love. This game is one of possibilities—of opposites and coexistences, of paradoxes and of mystery, of calculation and incalculability—a perfect game that can never end; a game in which timeless kisses are not measured in any unit known to Gods or men.

< *Slovenly Musings*

A few days earlier, an hour before dawn, when the air smelled of snow but the cloud droplets did not yet turn into crystals of ice, a body of a broad-shouldered man in his late thirties was found in the river. It must have been a cold death. A passerby claimed to have seen the stranger jump off the bohemian bridge. The deceased didn't leave behind any farewell note. With his either desperate or rebellious act he increased, by an insignificant one, the number of tabular entries in some annual data frame to be statistically analyzed under the tags of national criminal and public health records.

The police initiated an inquiry and canvassed the scene. For several hours they disturbed the colony of avant-garde artists, local vagabonds and self-professed spiritual seekers sojourned on their macadam-covered bridge. They asked mostly predictable questions, but a few opaque ones, too. It did not take long before acuity led them discover that a child, a puppy, and a middle-aged, bearded man wearing thick glasses must have been, in one way or the other, involved in the unfortunate event.

The morning after my payment-in-kind at the cobbler's house, I grabbed \aleph_0 and headed towards the animal shelter in the suburbia. One more meeting with Theo, I thought, and I would be finally able to leave behind everything from that surreal week. I was looking forward to the beginning of a new one, and the thought of my lecture hall mollified my frustration.

It was there, at the doorsteps of that uncanny place, that I finally got to know the fate of \aleph_0 's owner. Stricken by the malodor and the howling of all the mongrels under Theo's care, I failed to notice the officer who stood in the far end of the compound.

'Ah, here he comes,' Theo exclaimed as soon as I entered. He hurriedly stood up, as if his crooked old feet could wait not even a minute longer to jump into his newly mended

boots. His tripod chair made a cracking sound, its tips instantaneously swaying into a new planar position³³.

I did not feel like talking to anyone, especially him. I wanted to just drop the boots and the dog, and quickly go back to my comforting seclusion. Theo's space repulsed me; it played rotten tricks on me, prompting mental images of *Puss in Boots*, even though there was nothing feline about a dog caretaker.

'Tell me about the dog,' the officer caught me off guard, the moment I placed \aleph_0 in Theo's arms. 'I am told that you brought it here a couple of days ago.' He further said that a man had died by suicide, and that I might be among the very last few with whom the man had crossed path.

The information startled me. I wasn't able to remember much about the looks of the stranger with whom I had merely exchanged a sentence or two. I described a tall, good-looking man of nearly the same age as mine. I mentioned his athletic physique and his husky voice, as well as his obvious affection towards the little girl who was with him. I insisted that there had been nothing particularly strange in his behavior, indicative of the extreme step he would have taken later that night. The officer thanked me, took my details and mentioned I might be contacted again. He said that the little girl was indeed the daughter of the deceased, and that the family wanted to have the puppy back.

I swear that, in that moment, I saw once again cinder and silvery ashes glittering all over the place. It felt as if the shelter, together with its abandoned dogs, the officer, and old Theo fell under some spell, became motionless, temporary, and insignificant parts of some gloomy fairytale in which the storyteller had somehow forgotten to benumb me, too.

My phantasmia was back. The air around me glittered and smelled of charcoal. A pair of innocent eyes shimmered, and I heard a child's voice say *I cannot see your face*. Would I dare, if I met her again, tell her how inconsiderate I have been of the destiny of her

puppy, and how selfishly, instead, I have been searching for the meaning of its unusual locket?

.....

‘How did I end up here?’ I murmured half-rhetorically, insinuating Theo’s involvement in the recent events. \aleph_0 was gone, replaced by some minatory disquiet rather than the anticipated relief.

‘It’s a boon,’ he replied, ‘to plunge into the unknown when you have slowly begun to forget how to live.’

I thought those were strange words, especially coming from someone like Theo.

‘When I saw you try to get rid of that dog, I was intrigued. Anyone in your place would have grown attached to that endearing little creature; you, on the other hand, refused to be beguiled,’ he continued.

‘And who are you to gauge my patience and question my motives?’ I could no longer suppress hostility.

‘Just an old man who takes care of a few disowned animals,’ he rebutted me with an outward humbleness.

‘You extorted a favor,’ I insisted.

‘I never forced you to do anything,’ he denied.

‘Didn’t you refuse to shelter the puppy the first time I brought it here? Instead, you let it follow me and find its way back to my house.’ Strangely, I was still convinced that the little dog had somehow managed, all by himself, to find his way back to me. It did not occur to me that someone (Theo, maybe?) could have left him at my door.

‘I only gave the dog a chance to follow its instinct and find its true owner,’ replied Theo.

‘But I am not his owner!’

‘Beyond any doubt? Then why would a dying man decide to leave his dog to you? And how come it ran straight back to you?’

‘I do not know, and I wish I never had to find out,’ I bridled at his remark. Yet I was inevitably reminded of the mares and the foals in Vuk’s dark story.

This time Theo did not immediately retort. We shared a few moments of almost friendly wordlessness; then, all of a sudden, he blinked and turned cross-eyed. Although he stood right in front of me, it felt he was actually looking *through* me.

‘It is about time you found your true face,’ he finally said.

My hand instinctively went towards my chin. *If I hear these words one more time, I thought, I might develop some kind of a nervous tic, like a head-jerk or a neck-twist.*

‘It isn’t the beard that conceals it,’ he refuted. ‘Although, there is some merit in probing your reasons for growing one,’ he smiled.

‘You are mustached too,’ I challenged.

‘I am sure you can do better than that what-about-ism,’ he elegantly dismissed my *tu quoque* provocation. It occurred to me that my enmity towards this man might be a form of subconscious admiration. Theo didn’t wear his intellect on his sleeve, and he certainly didn’t bother to impress. Yet, each time, he somehow hit a nerve almost effortlessly. I became suspicious of his real personality concealed under his, somewhat despicable, appearance.

At my age, I thought, a man must already be no stranger to a dozen or so personal failings. I was well past the peak age for a professional breakthrough—maths is indeed a young man’s game. I still wished to believe that the toils of the midlife crisis had not turned me infantile, neither intellectually nor psychologically. I hadn’t yet started any fitness workout, although I had continued to swim regularly, ensuring that my physical activity kept me in shape. I had not reworked my wardrobe to stay in vogue. With no wife or a family, and being introvert, the possibility of lapsing into a fling with some random young woman was altogether pointless and out of my reach.

Yet I wasn't able to give a name to that emotion, that mixture of guilt, pique and lack of closure, that clenched onto me. I had internalized the blame for the outré endings of my relationships with my lovers. I wondered the power of that malison within me, capable of so radically changing the carnal likings and inclinations of both the women I have been intimate with.

In that state of enduring self-scrutiny, it was thus utterly irritating to find myself involved in something so trivial as getting a home for a stray dog, or exchanging quasi-spiritual one-liners with a lone wolf from the suburbia.

Seemingly out of nowhere, Theo pulled out a bottle of alcohol and offered me a glass. Everything around him had a tad of eccentricity; even that bottle in his hands looked like some type of a laboratory flask. It was the first time in many days that someone finally offered me something without asking for anything in return.

'It might have looked like a game to you, but that is the law of life,' he spoke. 'You must find your center. All which really matters will gravitate towards that center; all which is redundant will drift away. It is wisdom not to judge the nature of what comes and leaves—even when it is about something seemingly insignificant, such as a small dog.'

'Is this some fatalistic dogma which you subscribe to?' I asked, and finally plucked up the courage to taste that peregrine wine.

'Not really,' he replied. 'It is a simple observation. Just look around,' he said. 'Everyone tries to defy the natural. People renounce what comes to them, and keep running after things that are out of their reach. But ultimately, very few things that belong to you can be kept away, and those which are not yet yours, once attained, are likely to turn out much less gratifying than expected.'

'It still sounds like an excerpt from some cheap self-help booklet,' I provoked. 'And there is a bit of sour grapes philosophy in it, too.'

'Fatalism is a funny belief, a weak man's solace,' he dismissed my accusation. 'And besides, the things I referred to are not material.'

'What are you saying, then?'

'There are so many things that cannot be explained by one's genes, upbringing or level of education—you cannot even blame poverty or affluence. Take, for example, your attitude towards kinship and family ties. Your choice of lovers. Your understanding of pleasure and pain. Your fear of death.'

'What about them?' I asked.

'Can you reach to the roots of your inclinations? Do you know where your temper comes from?'

'I guess there are far too many factors contributing to who we become—why we respond to some things with love, and to others with hostility.'

'Should we, then, give up the idea of mastering ourselves?'

I did not respond, but he had more to add. 'The finesse is in being able to drop the tension and end the struggle against every single thing that feels uncomfortable. Try to understand what irks you and why, and what could, in a long run, turn out to be beneficial for you. Give each a chance before you make your final verdict,' he said.

'Neither can I see any finesse in the manner in which you have treated me—both you and that cobbler of yours—nor do I understand why you are telling me any of this.'

'Yet I am so glad that you are here,' he replied with atypical softness.

'And you should be,' I said, this time just ostensibly nettled. 'You got your boots, and you don't even have to take in another dog!'

That artisanal alcohol started nibbling at my wariness. I relaxed, spread my elbows on the table, and asked for another round. A strange place for leisure, I thought, even for a nonconformist of my breed.

I started describing to Theo the incidents of that night, somewhat differently than I had done earlier while reporting to the officer. The rigor of the earlier testimony was now replaced by the humane fallibility of my emotional experience. I tried to paint the scene

of chestnuts cracked open over a bed of incandescent embers, the glimmering ice fog under the street lights, the sense of wonder in that little girl's eyes, my broken self, and the seemingly content man who had foisted a puppy on me.

'Perceptions,' Theo commented, once I finished my story. 'You described perceptions, reflective of your state of mind.'

'Magical, maybe?' I replied. 'Or quite distorted, if you will.'

'A solipsist would go as far as to say that everything you saw was not even real. Neither is this animal shelter real. And this bottle of monastic wine shared with an old zany man might also not exist outside your mind.'

'I am a mathematician,' I replied. 'I believe in objective truth.'

'I suspected as much.'

'How come?' I asked. 'Is there a formula spread across my forehead, written in some invisible ink?'

'I like your sense of humor,' he replied, 'but I am not a gazer.'

'Do speak,' I insisted. 'It is the least you could do, given everything I have been through, courtesy of yours.'

'Do you really want to hear? All right, then. There is an intrinsic polarity in you. It is about the way you dealt with the unwanted 'dog problem'—you were all too pedantic and diligent. Yet on the other hand, you are so slovenly—or nonchalant at best—in the way you treat people. From the way in which you narrated your story, I realize that you are also a poet, and moreover, one fond of the bottle. If this didn't bracket you, you'd be one of a kind!'

His scrutiny was defeating—I felt both flattered and offended at once. I was getting drunk, but I also grew increasingly interested in this enemy or friend; after all, I thought, he liked me sufficiently much to share a bottle of his finest wine.

‘What’s the hurry,’ he asked, seeing me ready to leave. ‘Do you have some better way to spend the evening?’ He once again removed his muddy loafers, put the mended boots on, and started jumping around, in a quirky state of euphoria.

Had it not been the end of the week, and had I not had classes scheduled for the next morning, I might have stayed longer. Having my mind dissected by a dog keeper with a rare flair for the human psyche felt a hundred times better than the boredom of my daily life. But it was snowing, and it was late, and I had to make sure I reached home before the air turned bitterly cold.

X *Antithesis*

I know now that the precious things in life come unannounced, amidst the most ordinary of circumstances. They step into the day disguised as moments of randomness. They enter the space with grace, carrying a taste of the familiar. Until time proves that there was nothing random about them. Until one sees that those moments mend the spirit, just like a cobbler mends a broken shoe. It took me long to see traces of that precious in the face of Anna (or Joanna), \aleph_0 , Theo and all the people who, seemingly out of nowhere, entered my life and forced me to change.

About a week after I bid my farewell to \aleph_0 , a young, slender woman with eyes of a troubled soul greeted me at the doors of the lecture auditorium; she had been waiting for my class on *Green's Theorem* to finish. With a bashful tremor in her voice, she asked me if she could have a word with me. She said her name was Luna, and that she was Erik's sister. 'Erik,'—she was quick to add—'the man who took his own life eleven days ago.' With a maladroit sense of sympathy I tried to sound friendly, and invited her to follow me to my office.

Mia once said that an elusive aura always surrounds a woman in distress. *Her face lines become softer, her eyes resemble those of a wounded animal, and her whole being radiates a cry for masculine help*, she said. Mia believed in the evolutionary foundations of this phenomenon, and attributed this gender drama of the nature to the grand dance of the hormones.

I had laughed at Mia's theory, dismissing it as yet another feminist derision of men's (in)ability to understand female nature. But that day, looking at the face of the woman who sat across my office desk, I found vestige of truth in Mia's words.

'I apologize if I overstepped my boundaries by coming here,' Luna began reluctantly.

I tried to convince her that I wasn't disquieted by her visit.

‘I will not trouble you long,’ she continued. ‘I came to thank you for having taken care of the beagle. We believe Erik must have picked it up on the very same day. Else, he would have mentioned it to someone in our family. My niece, Tea, suddenly started talking about a puppy, but no-one took her words for a fact. You see—she is such a creative child, that we thought she had made up another story. I guess she got that from her father—Erik loved music, painting, poetry...

‘Then came the news. We had to tell Tea she would never see her father again. There was no point hiding the truth from such a bright child. You would imagine the sorrow and distress of a seven-year-old. She has stopped talking, but her puppy has become her inseparable companion.’

My feeling of guilt grew at the thought of everything I had done to get rid of that dog.

‘I do not really understand what happened that evening,’ I said. ‘I held the puppy for a minute or two and, before I knew, I lost trace of your brother and your niece. I tried hard to find them...’

‘It is not your fault,’ she interrupted me. ‘You see, Tea’s parents have been separated for over a year. Erik spent that day with his daughter, before he dropped her at her mother’s house. I know my sister-in-law—she would have never approved of a pet. I suspect Erik must have deliberately left the puppy with the first stranger he found convenient—which happened to be you.’

‘At least Tea got it back,’ I said. ‘She seems like a sweet girl.’

Covering her eyes, Luna tried to hold back her tears. I hated myself for my acute inaptness in such situations.

She quickly pulled herself together, apologized one more time, and found the courage to mutter, at last, what really bothered her.

‘I need to know...did you notice anything unusual about my brother that night? Did he seem unhappy, or worried, or lost? Could you tell he had been on the edge...’

I did not rush to answer. I understood her pain.

‘You see, Erik always appeared a happy man. Even in hard times, he would always find strength. He smiled, he consoled, he brought light everywhere. It is hard to believe he would do such a thing...’

‘I wish I had answers to your questions,’ I said. ‘But I barely saw your brother. I cannot possibly know what was on his mind that evening. But yes, I can say that, to me, he looked composed and serene. He and his daughter seemed to be happily enjoying their walk.’

I knew she hoped for a different answer, for some clue, for an insight into the state of her brother’s mind. My reply couldn’t have fulfilled her need to find out the truth.

‘May I ask you one more thing,’ she said hesitantly. ‘You can say no if you find it inappropriate. Would you come with me to the animal shelter?’

‘Why would you want to go there?’ I did not expect the request.

‘Because that shelter is not only the place where you brought the puppy; it is also the place from where Erik had taken it. The police said the caretaker at the shelter recognized the beagle, and he also remembered Erik. I would like to talk to him. Maybe he noticed something unusual about my brother.’

A sudden bout of cold sweat beset me, and it felt as if all the blood withdrew from my head. Theo, the rogue! After everything he had done, I still fell prey to his misconstructions, and even drank wine with him! I realized I shouldn’t have trusted him; staying away from him would have spared me more than just a trouble. But the self-harming core of my being dragged me, once again, to the footsteps of that animal shelter in the suburbia.

.....

‘Looking for a closure is a most absurd urge,’ Theo said. ‘You think you need to find answers, decipher the logic, and debunk his motives for doing what he did. This is both absurd and utterly futile.’

‘It is my brother we are talking about! You must be able to see why I would seek answers.’ Luna pleaded.

What she didn’t know was that Theo was incapable of responding softly to a human plea.

‘The last time something precious came into your life, did you ask why it chose you? Did you seek any answers at that time?’ This was the way he responded to a woman in mourning. Worse, he did not even stop there.

‘What are you hoping to get? Freedom from a feeling of guilt? I assure you that, if you seek long enough and keep digging deep enough, you will trace the dents which you, too, have made on your brother’s life. Are they good or bad? Who knows! In that way, we can all be credited and blamed for so many things we are not even aware of. Could you have noticed your brother’s pain? Maybe. Could you have prevented his act? I don’t know. But if you seek definitive answers, you’ll only end up constructing a story which you might never be able to verify.’

Hearing his words, Luna shriveled up like a fern. So did I. Theo raged through my mind too, twisting my thoughts round, bringing all those question marks together into a whirlpool, until my consciousness turned into an infinite spiral that drew me inside a vicious void. It was hard to believe that someone could display so little empathy at someone who had recently been bruised by a death in the family.

‘Those whom you call most important,’ Theo was not yet ready to stop, ‘are also the ones whom you control the most. You say you love them, yet you love none of their choices unless they are acceptable to you. You claim you would do anything for them, and yet you covertly expect reciprocity. This is a calculated love. And when that important one suddenly leaves your world—either literally or figuratively—you feel

hurt and cheated. Because you want the accounts to be even. Because you fail to understand that life and death do not operate in terms of profit and loss.'

'Why didn't you tell me you recognized the dog?' I stepped forward. 'Instead, you chose to mislead and torture me by assigning a droll task, and then watched me make a fool of myself.'

'What difference would it have made?' he asked. 'My job is to take care of abandoned animals. It is in my own interest to prevent an increase in their number.'

'Did not you find it strange that the puppy you had given for adoption came back within three days, moreover under such circumstances?'

'I shall say it again, perhaps a bit differently this time. I take care of stray dogs, instead of wasting my time brooding about the reasons why people abandon them.'

Had Luna not been there with us, I wouldn't have stopped there. But debating with Theo in front of a grieving woman seemed tasteless.

'Listen, lady,' Theo suddenly turned toward Luna again. 'I can tell you this. Erik loved these dogs. He used to come here at least twice a week, for at least a couple of months. An intelligent and silent man. Always alone. He often brought food for the animals. A few times I suggested him to adopt one. He always found an excuse not to. He once asked, half-jokingly, if there was anyone ready to adopt him. At another time he said he would have adopted the whole world, if only he could. I am not a man who insists.

'If you want to know whether I sensed any despair in him, I will inevitably disappoint you. I am too old to not know that pain is hidden in every man. I had no business scratching under the surface of your brother's smile. Ultimately, it is not about whether or not there is sorrow in someone. It is about how he carries it. It is about what he decides to do with it.

'I am telling you, lady, it is best if you just let it be. If Erik decided not to leave you a note, then he must have knowingly protected you from looking into his darkness.'

It was definitely time for me and Luna to leave.

‘By the way,’ Theo added as he bid me farewell, ‘Did you notice anything interesting about that puppy’s collar? Erik mentioned there was some sign etched on it, something that only a mathematician would be able to appreciate. The day he took the beagle, I was convinced he had chosen the dog only because of that collar! Now that I know you make a living out of mathematics, I am sure that you and Erik would have gotten along quite well!’

‘Nah,’ I replied. Theo’s words sounded like another cunning provocation, and so I pretended not to be affected by the mention of the infinity puzzle. ‘People are crazy,’ I said. ‘They put on Japanese samurai tattoos, wear Himalayan *sadhu* dreadlocks and Chinese *yin* and *yang* jewelry, without having a clue what those symbols stand for. The dog’s collar is just one more example of this craze over arcane ideograms. The International Mathematical Union should raise concerns over such commercialization, which is nothing short of an intellectual and scientific appropriation of a mathematical symbol by a certain lot of canine lovers!’

‘Fine, fine,’ he replied. ‘Stay well.’ I knew he did not believe a word of what I had just said.

But I had no intention of telling him anything about the key. Luckily, I had put it back inside the locket around \aleph_0 ’s neck and so, except for the cobbler’s note (which, I suspect, had once belonged to \aleph_0 ’s owner), nothing of Erik’s property remained in my possession.

.....

Luna and I quickly grew fond of each other’s company. After our pernicious exposure to Theo’s outlook, I invited her for a drink at the first café I spotted on our way back to the city. I thought we both deserved a chance to go off on a tangent (what a delightful mathematical idiom, don’t you think?) and for a change, have a normal conversation.

We ended up meeting almost every day for the next couple of weeks. We sometimes had an evening walk by the river, where we dared open up without the risk of looking into each other's eyes. At other times we shared a quick brunch, or went together to the National Museum. We attended a piano concert, and a book launching event, each time deciding on the spur of the moment.

When on one such occasion she invited me to join her on a visit to the city cathedral, I almost stepped back. Fortunately, I quickly regained my wit and did not let my aversion towards all forms of organized religion ruin the moment for her. I knew my attitude would be a sacrilege of her need for solace. Once inside the cathedral, I let her have her moment of pray and contemplation, while I silently accompanied her, refraining from any outburst of cynicism that would have typically followed.

Had there been any spark between us, it must have disappeared instantaneously. Luna was an attractive woman, but neither the circumstances nor our chemistries conspired to bring us close in such a way. For Luna, talking was therapeutical, while I, listening to her, somehow became the most nonjudgmental version of myself I had ever allowed to exist. She talked a lot about her life and her family (mostly about her brother). I, on the other hand, having no particular interest in the lives of those strangers, listened more to the tone of her voice and the emotions hooked onto it, rather than to Luna's story. Perhaps this is the reason why I am now unable to reproduce any dialogue or anecdote the two of us shared during those long hours of empathetic togetherness.

At first I thought that Luna, too, was an incredible listener. For the first time since Mia had left me, I spoke to someone about my state of mind. I let the flux of disappointment and despair savage through my words. I told Luna how angry I was at Vuk, for having seduced Mia's soul into the world of symbols and rites of Orthodox Christianity.

I admitted I was partly to be blamed for letting him influence Mia so profoundly. I should have known he was well capable of it—after all, he was the same man who had,

years ago, convinced me to engage in the realms of folklore, mythology and the history of magical thinking.

‘Does he really have such magnetic personality?’ asked Luna.

‘Undoubtedly so,’ I replied. ‘The very fact that I have not yet dismissed all that mysticism and spirituality as mere nonsense is due to one reason only—the power of his words.’

I was still able to, quite vividly, recall one of my early conversations with Vuk which had taken place more than two decades ago.

‘Why would a man of such strong scientific bent choose to explore the world of the esoteric?’ I had asked, knowing very well that, had he wished to, he could have easily become either a physicist or a mathematician, of a rank higher than I could ever imagine myself be.

‘Because of the idiosyncrasies of the human mind,’ he replied. ‘The way an intellectual giant sees the world depends on his own frame of reference and the instruments at his display. But what if logic wasn’t the only way to grasp life?’

‘By logic, I suppose, you mean both the valid rules of inference and the methods of scientific thinking, right? Is there any viable alternative to it?’ I challenged him.

‘I am not ready to dismiss the dimensions of human development known to individuals like Buddha, Jesus, or Mansur Al Hallaj,’ he said.

‘Are you bringing faith and religious thought at par with scientific knowledge?’

‘You could say so, as long as we are clear that I am not interested in the followers of any form of organized religion—at best, they are merely simulacrums of the original flame. I am interested in those very few men who have known something so profound, that they caused tectonic socio-cultural shifts. Of course, in some cases, they also initiated new spiritual and religious movements, but that is a different phenomenon.’ He spoke with unparalleled passion.

‘But, isn’t that approach to life and death critically different from the scientific one? How can you reconcile the two?’

‘If that is the case,’ Vuk replied, ‘then all the way better! Can you imagine the amazing outcome resulting from a creative companionship of a few great men who differ fundamentally from one another? The world today brags about a shift towards inter- and trans-disciplinary research, but is it really so? To what extent have different branches of science merged? Have science and art really come any closer than they have been at the time of the great DaVinci? Did the *magnum opus* of Jung and Einstein’s theory of relativity bring psychology and physics any closer?’

‘The world doesn’t dare to even try and bind together the works of its greatest intellectuals such as Darwin, Gauss, Freud, Maslow and Tesla! Interdisciplinary research largely remains collaboration between proximate sciences. Yes—statistics, informatics, philosophy and neuroscience have started to bridge some of those gorges, but imagine how much more would be possible if people did not fret to collaborate in areas as far as possible from one another!’

‘What if a great enlightened soul and a genius scientific mind were able to communicate using each other’s language? What if each initiated the other into his own world, and let each other experience reality through completely different lenses?’

‘True, all kinds of swindlers, blackguards and intellectual *hochstaplers* keep talking nonsense; they link precognition to quantum physics, or try to attribute the course of world history to secret societies and secret governments. Not only do I despise such conmen, but I abhor them for all the damage they have done to generations of truth seekers.’

There was absolutely no need to share any of this with Luna—or with anybody else for that matter—yet I kept blabbering for a couple of hours, like someone who had just got a chance to step out of a prolonged period of involuntary solitude.

‘In some weird way our camaraderie (Vuk’s, Mia’s and mine) became a triangle from which I came out as a loser,’ I said. ‘Mia found Vuk’s intellectual assertions to be stronger—or, perhaps, more relevant—than my love for her, and so that is how I lost her.’

‘I understand how painful this must have been for you,’ said Luna, having listened to my story. ‘I feel despair in your words. You shouldn’t be feeling embarrassed. You did not push your girlfriend towards monastic living. Clearly, none of this is your fault.’

Luna was Theo’s antithesis. As much as his words revolted me for their absence of heed, hers repelled me for their prosaic scrutiny. Although she tried hard not to hurt me, her words had the opposite effect. She sounded so patronizing. At once, I regretted having said anything to her.

▷ *Fractal Snowflakes*

A couple of nights later, while I was unable to fall asleep, a bit of what Luna had told me surfaced back. *None of this is your fault*, she had said. I was determined, in some bizarre way, to prove her wrong.

I opened my laptop and fed the search box with phrases of the type *my girlfriend/wife/partner left me for God/religion/cult/spirituality*. I was deluged with what the Internet threw back at me. I found out I hadn't been alone in my sorrow. Thousands of people on the *world wide web* publicly shared their agony of having lost a partner to some idea of a spiritual self-realization. A part of me exhaled with relief. Yet another part went into raptures about the scale of the phenomenon.

I closed my laptop, jumped out of my bed, and quickly pulled a few clothes on. I needed some fresh air. It was late, the streets would be empty of people, and that was exactly how I liked them best.

It wasn't snowing anymore, but the city was still white. The branches of the old oaks were covered in rime ice. It was so silent, that all I could hear was the cracking sound of those trees, and the hoarfrost crunching under my feet.

It was the first time that I went back to the bridge from which Erik had jumped into annihilation. I had stayed away from the area, either out of respect for Luna (at least that's what I wished to believe), or due to my discomfort with places of (anyone's) grief. The latter trait prodded Vuk to once call me an atheistic empath.

I wasn't prepared for what I was about to see. A group of ten or so arty looking people stood on the bridge, long after the city clock had stricken midnight. An eccentric young man, seated in Turkish style on what seemed like a prayer carpet, sang some unbearably doleful song in a language I was unable to recognize. The others stood around him, leaning on the fences of the bridge, silently listening. There was such melodiousness in

his voice, that he didn't need any instrument to accompany him. The song could have been a lullaby for grown ups. The tune had sweet rotundity to it, and each word in that unknown language sounded absolutely spellbinding.

The man's outfit seemed fit for his performance—his dress, pristine-white like the snow, resembled a long-sleeved kaftan with flared sleeves and, paired with a fez-like hat, it reminded me of a dervish attire. The singer kept his eyes closed and his arms unfettered, letting them draw dreamlike imagery in the air.

Indeed, music and mathematics are divinely united—they are like lovers who endlessly dive into one another. Without the ratios, patterns and geometry, music would lose its rhythm and harmony. Then again, all the great math proofs have the rigor, elegance and tuning of a perfect musical form.

No-one seemed to be bothered by my presence. The man sang for a long time, but his vocal dynamics was so masterful, that I did not notice the moment when the song melted into silence. No-one applauded; instead, the people in the group hugged one another, and then slowly started walking away.

Absorbed in the tenebrous aesthetics of the experience, I stood there a bit longer. When I thought I was alone at last, a heavy pair of hands gripped my shoulders. Caught unprepared, I convulsed. Turning around quickly, I heard Theo's laughter and saw his glittering eyes, two head lengths above mine.

'You look like someone who could use a glass of my artisanal wine,' he quickly took me by the arm, as if he knew I wouldn't refuse. A few of his bohemian friends, who had already reached the other side of the bridge, started calling us to hurry. Everything seemed so surreal, that I decided to stay with the group.

I needed to get to the bottom of this unsought series of events which somehow always converged to Theo.

We didn't enter the animal shelter. Instead, we went behind the shacks, towards Theo's bijou house. He welcomed us all. The one whom I had, until recently, considered a man of bilious temper and nutty lifestyle, suddenly revealed a suave personality.

His home was most unusual. We all sat together by the fireplace, drank that rare wine from the flask-looking bottles, and ate exquisite blue cheese. The interior was minimalistic, and the most impressive element of furniture and decorations were the rugs tailored to cover every inch on the floor. They were thick, handmade, ornamental carpets, with shapes that resembled *Koch's snowflake*³⁴.

'it seems you like this carpet,' a man seated next to me tried to strike up a conversation. 'I remember when Theo brought it from one of his travels to the Middle East.'

I immediately recognized the young man—he was the mystery singer.

'It is indeed a very special piece of work,' I replied. 'The design had to catch my attention. You see, I am a mathematician. And *this* is one giant fractal,' I added.

'Is that so?' he seemed interested. 'Would you mind telling me a little bit more?'

I asked, 'Do you see this large triangle in the center—the one with all three sides of equal length?' I ran my finger over the middle of the carpet, in order to make the contours of my representation visible to his (I thought mathematically untrained) eye.

'Oh yes,' he agreed with an unexpected enthusiasm. 'I do see an *equilateral* triangle in the middle.' He emphasized the word *equilateral*, as if I were to be impressed by his familiarity with math terminology, merely passable for a junior student of geometry.

Yet I tried not to disparage him, quickly dispelling that wry voice inside me.

'Exactly,' I said instead. 'Now, trisect each of its sides. Turn the middle parts into bases of new equilateral triangles pointed outwards, and then remove their bases. What we get is a dodecagon, a twelve-sided polygon.'

‘Yes, indeed,’ he seemed to have understood. ‘Isn’t that a hexagram—a six point star, the *Star of David*?’ he asked, effortlessly switching to a cabalistic jargon which altogether seemed far more fitting to his guise.

‘Yes, you can call it a hexagram,’ I replied, and quickly continued my elaboration. ‘We can now trisect each of its twelve sides, the same way we earlier split those of the triangle, producing new polygons and repeating the process to infinity. The result is this perfect snowflake, displayed on the carpet.’

‘That is awesome,’ he replied, ‘It is truly amazing how you see geometry in objects of art and spirituality.’ This was his opportunity to label me an insular rationalist, devoid of any intuition or artistic sensibility.

‘Oh, but I also see infinity in it,’ I retorted.

‘That’s interesting. Please tell me more,’ he invited, with a mindfully balanced tad of provocation.

‘The snowflake is a representation of infinity contained within a finite region. Its shape, made of infinitely many triangles drawn upon one other, has a finite area but an infinite perimeter. Of course, this would be true provided the weaver had been capable of knotting infinitesimally small triangles and had had infinite time at hand. However, we can consider the image on the carpet as a reasonably good approximation.’

‘You know, on the other hand, you can view this shape as a giant *yantra*,’ the singer replied. ‘A mystical and intuitive depiction of the microcosm, macrocosm, and the intersection of the two, where the soul resides.’

He thought he would impress me with his occult vocabulary and knowledge of sacred geometry. He most certainly did not know I was not quite an outsider to the world of the esoteric. I smiled, and then threw back a challenge, aiming right at the center of his hermetic self.

‘Let me share a math *koan* with you—if you agree, of course,’ I said, with confidence of a charlatan. ‘Imagine you were nothing but a point in the truest mathematical sense—

lengthless, widthless and heightless—in other words, completely dimensionless. Now, suppose some absolute entity—let us call her the Supreme Math Goddess—placed you somewhere along the edges of your known world. The world which we are taking about has the shape of this very same snowflake, and thus the meridian you are to walk along is nothing but a fractal curve. You have to keep walking, until you fully circumvent your world (in other words: until you discover the fringes of it). Remember: you are nothing but a point. Once you start walking, you'll need to cross a path of infinite length in order to reach again to your initial position (let's call it your cradle, your origin, the place of genesis). Would you need to be an immortal in order to walk a path of infinite length? Would the speed of your walk mean anything for your progress along the curve? And finally: how long would it take before your mind accepted the possibility that your infinite struggle to understand a finite world (one of finite area) was an impossible task, if you stuck to the old ways?

‘As long as you remain a point, the continuity of your effort is pointless—nothing significant will occur in your understanding of the nature of your universe. Your feeling of progress will remain just that—nothing more than an illusion of a change—while, in fact, you will keep plunging deeper into a single corner of that inscrutable world.’

‘But what if you changed your perspective?’ asked the singer. ‘For example, what if you left your path and you were—miraculously—elevated above your world? As if standing on the top of the highest mountain, on the vertex of the *axis mundi*, you would suddenly grasp it all—see it all—and understand?’

‘That is what enlightenment is all about. It never happens gradually. Just like love, it takes you by surprise. If you want to understand, you'll need to give up the futility of that infinite bug-walk, to dare fall off the cliff into the abyss, to be ready to either perish or ascend to something radically new. You know very well that many before you have tried and failed, but although the hollow pillars of all the monasteries, *ashrams*, and *tekkes* of this world conceal the whispers of those who have fallen and crashed, you

choose to listen only to the prayers, hymns and chants of those who have succeeded to elevate above this finite world of infinite struggle.

‘In order to jump without reservations, regret, or a foolish proneness to peril, you need to be convinced that you’ve done everything that could and ought to be done. You need not to believe, but finally *know*, that you have exhausted the limits of all your methods, efforts, and devotion.

‘You need to learn to love truth more than you love yourself. Otherwise, you will end up in self-pity, in depression. Your dark night of the soul will never give way to the light of the new day. You’ll become one more ghost whisper of a pillar in some forgotten shrine.

‘I have a huge admiration for people who understand mathematics,’ Zafir suddenly concluded and turned amiable. ‘As you have seen, I do have a talent or two, but life didn’t endow me with a gift for the numbers.’

‘Neither was I born with an ear for music,’ I replied. ‘Even though I respect—and envy a bit—music artists like you.’

‘Zafir,’ he offered his hand. ‘That is my artistic name. Everybody calls me by that name.’

‘Alexander,’ I responded. ‘My one and only name.’

We both laughed.

‘What was the language in which you sang that song on the bridge?’ I asked. ‘I liked the sound of it.’

‘Aramaic,’ Zafir replied. ‘It is a liturgic language, still spoken in parts of the Levant. It is the language of Jesus. And where there is God, there is the Devil too,’ he threw an unexpected remark.

I cared not either for God nor for the Devil. It was Mia’s touch that I remembered upon hearing about the language of the Orthodox world. I knew everything about the place which Mia considered her new home—not just the geographic coordinates of the

monastery, but even its satellite imagery, so easily traceable in this age of digital omnipresence. All the same, I could do nothing to bring her back.

I suddenly recognized another voice. 'There you are, the best snow shoveler in town!' That was the cobbler, drinking and laughing at me. His thick glasses, not so different from mine, reflected the color of the red wine he was drinking. Just like Theo, he seemed to have utterly enjoyed my feeling of social disorientation.

'Oh, so you've met Enoch?' Zafir asked.

'That cannot be your real name!' I exclaimed, looking at the cobbler.

'What if it is?' he dared me. 'Am I not fit for the name?'

'I think I get it,' I replied. 'Everyone here seems to be having an artistic name or a pseudonym.'

'A cobbler is not an artist,' he passed up. 'But yes, he can become a master of the skill. Just like a blacksmith, or a carpet weaver.'

I did not imagine he would also be a master of hermeneutics, so I tried to let it go.

'Before he met Theo, Zafir thought he was tone deaf. Before I met Theo, I thought I couldn't hammer a nail. But you heard him sing tonight. And I guess you saw the mended soles on Theo's boots!'

'A name can change everything,' Zafir added. 'But also, a man is one challenge away from a new name!'

I thought the conversation was turning asinine.

'Why would a man need a new name?' I asked.

'In order to withdraw from an erroneous identity, and to start recognizing his real face,' replied the cobbler, the one whom I refused to accept under the sacred name of Enoch.

The face, I finally understood, was some sort of an imagery, focal to their self-transformation school of thought. It could be a metaphor for some primordial self-identity, or maybe a symbol of an enlightened soul.

‘So tell us,’ Zafir kept at it, ‘Where did it all begin *for you*?’

I had no clue what he had just asked.

‘You wouldn’t be here without a moment of absent-mindedness,’ he said. ‘That’s Theo’s way of bringing people into his circle. So, what triggered your trial?’

I couldn’t immediately respond. Zafir and Enoch gave me a couple of minutes to cast my mind back to that particular night. I wasn’t sure if I wanted to share the story with them—perhaps it would be more accurate to say that I wasn’t convinced any of them would take me seriously even if I did. Yet there I was, sitting on a big fractal snowflake; the wine titillated my senses, and the absurdity of it all had already taken me to a what-the-hell state of mind.

‘I guess it was a dog,’ I finally said. ‘An unwanted one, given to me by a stranger, unsolicitedly. I spent days trying to find that man and get rid of the dog. I was yo-yoed around, fulfilling ridiculous whims of people who I thought were going to help me. I looked like *The Fool* from the *Tarot*, carrying Theo’s shoes on a bindle stick over my shoulders, and followed by a dog. In the end, it turned out the mystery man was dead, and the real owner of the dog had been no other than Theo!’

The two just laughed, looking at each other the way insiders understand one another without words.

‘That dog must have been Theo’s ball of twine, given to you so that you can maneuver through the labyrinth of your own inner conflict,’ Enoch finally put down his glass and spoke to me. ‘I can see how, instead of using it as a clue, you got yourself all tangled in it. Thus the frustration. But don’t beat yourself up—we have all been there.’

‘You see the dog as the beginning of everything,’ Zafir said. ‘But that’s not how it is. The dog’s appearance has to do with something else—something far more personal or

intimate. Can you remember what was on your mind, moments before you saw that dog?’

‘Chestnuts,’ I whispered, moved by the realization. Zafir did not need to nudge any further. I knew what those chestnuts meant to me—bitterness for being unwanted and abandoned like those canines at the animal shelter. Theo had only been trying to shield one more mad dog from harming himself.

I realized that the magic of that night, the chestnuts in the bed of cinders and the silvery particles in the air had been the remaining ashes of my destroyed world. I was tired, broken, and cynical. My bitterness was the hook onto which Theo fastened an end of his thread; he then pulled me and dragged me around, until I finally woke up from the slumber.

Enoch and Zafir knew that I had finally understood. They did not expect to hear details about my inner battle—they each had their own journey, and wouldn’t bother wasting their time on another man’s trifles. They might have played a supporting role in each other’s transformation (mine, too), but they knew they should no longer cling onto that involvement, the moment it was over.

It was all too overwhelming. My eyes wandered across the room until I finally saw Theo smile and raise his glass to me. I awkwardly smiled back.

Every time you kiss me, a world is created.

Every time I kiss you, a world vanishes.

Zafir sang quietly, as if no-one but me should hear him.

‘What was that?’ I asked impatiently, recognizing the verses.

‘It is *The Song of Love*,’ he replied with an expression too cryptic to reveal whether he was aware of my theft from the other day. ‘These are verses from the song I sang at the bridge. You said you liked the melody, so I thought you’d like to hear its lyrics too.’

‘Based on such lyrics, it could be considered a song of hate, too,’ I replied. ‘But I do not think I have said anything about the melody. It was the language that I admired.’

Zafir remained admirably neutral to my provocation.

‘One last thing,’ I dared to ask. He had said the language was Aramaic, but the mathematical underpinning of it could not have been older than a century or two³⁵. Thus I tried to catch him in a lie. ‘Is this some old, traditional Middle Eastern song? It certainly sounds like it!’

‘I wouldn’t know’ he said, unwilling to bite. ‘I learned it from someone who is no longer among us. Many people were asking about the lyrics, but not many remained interested, once I shared the translation.’

‘My apologies, but I must leave now,’ I said. Some other time we may discuss these lyrics in greater depth. Till then, stay well, Zafir.’

‘The real journey starts now,’ Zafir whispered into my ear. ‘You have recognized the scourge that has been holding you back. It is now time to face it, fight it, and finally master it. You can choose to do it alone. With Theo by your side, it might be painful, but it will also finish much faster. The decision is yours.’

By that time, I was quite certain that Erik must have shared with Theo much more than just a couple of weekly visits to the animal shelter. It was very likely he, too, had drank this wine and had sat on the fractal carpet. I felt a chill at the thought of how things had gone so bad in his experiment of self-discovery.

Books have blinded me. I thought I knew a lot; but then it took me so long to realize that I had unknowingly walked into a mystical group of sorts. I had been initiated into it, with my awareness of it next to none. I do admit—Theo was indeed a rare breed. Uncanny, charismatic, unpredictable and intelligent. One couldn’t help but feel a magnetic ambivalence towards him.

One thing is sure—he awoke peculiar anger inside me. I had to do something about my bitterness. I had to deal with my pain, with my shame and with my perpetual sense of regret. If I were not to discard what was left of my life, I had to be ready for a transformation.

But I didn't need a change that would be rapid and cruel. I did not need a Master like Theo. I did not want to end up anywhere near Erik. I had just turned forty-two and I was scared, but I believed I had all that was needed to become a new man.

⌘ *Bitter Men*

When, at four in the morning, I finally reached home, I found my apartment had been burglarized. Nothing except the lock on the front door was damaged. My laptop, my books and my papers were all in order (isn't it amazing that even a burglar did not defile my work space the way Anna or Joanna did?) Whatever little cash I had in the drawer was still lying there, intact. And then I remembered.

Every time you kiss me, a world is created.

Every time I kiss you, a world vanishes.

While I was drinking red wine, eating blue cheese and exchanging philosophical and spiritual wits with a cobbler and a musician, someone took that piece of paper from the bottom drawer on my study table. Everything was gone— \aleph_0 , its locket with the key, and finally even the cobbler's poem. The last tie to the animal shelter had been severed.

I did not report the break in to the police. What, possibly, could I have said—that a poem was missing? That I suspected it had been taken by an animal shelter worker who I believed was also a *guru* of some syncretic cult? That, in some strange way, all this could have been linked to the man who had recently died by suicide *after* giving his dog to me?

I also decided not to tell Luna anything about Theo's esoteric school, and so I kept to myself every suspicion I had about her brother's involvement in the group. Our companionship—which, given my age and the circumstances under which we met, I wouldn't dare call a friendship—started to degenerate after her *it's-not-your-fault* remark. Under the pretense of being busy with my research and teaching, I started to, gradually but firmly, push her away. This, however, was brazenly far from the truth, since my professional focus had already been turning opaque. In my classroom, I was

drifting into dull ex cathedra talks—something I could have never imagined before—and my interest in research was also diminishing at an unnerving rate.

My way of dealing with such bitterness was to finally confront it. I started spending most of my wake hours in front of my computer, reading stories, confessions, forum posts and blogs about people who had, just like me, lost their partners to (what I confidently labelled as) pseudo-religion or con-spirituality. Most of what I read was absolute rubbish; I dug through heaps of gibberish confessions and impotent grousing. People tried to deal with their helplessness, disappointment, despair, fear, anger and agony by joining support groups, by seeking advice from relationship gurus, or by accusing spiritual groups of wooing and brainwashing gullible individuals.

Many claimed that, apart from adolescents, women were especially prone to joining a sect, a cult or a religious movement. *Enter yoga, meditation, life regression therapy or any New Age type of a program*, they claimed, *and among the attendees you are guaranteed to find far more women than men*. This was to be attributed to the generally more open, selfless and loving female nature, as opposed to the egoistic and self-serving character of a man.

While I agreed with the observation that women generally outnumber men in some of these activities, I refused to accept the proposed rationale. I am ill-disposed to any stratification based on gender; there are very few things I detest more than bringing to the fore the gender of an accomplished scientist, of a Good Samaritan, or that of a controversial politician. Gender, I believe, is a vestigial attribute. In societies like mine, it no longer makes sense to consider it a factor in one's life choices and outcomes. Far too many psychological, cultural, social, economic and political factors contribute to an individual's predisposition to certain lifestyle choices.

After all, for several consecutive years, female students also outnumbered the male ones in my class on Advanced Calculus, yet I would never consider math aptitude to be in causal relationship with gender. It would sound like misandry, right? Some of my colleagues keep trying to establish, if not direct causality, then at least strong

correlation, between the government's affirmative action for women in STEM³⁶, and the new gender distribution in the classroom. I would be willing to have a look at their claims only once they are able to substantiate them with a serious longitudinal study.

What amazes me infinitely is that, while most people know how sexist it is to link intellect to gender, very few seem to mind correlating emotions to gender—as if the heart is to be treated weaker than the mind, and Psyche inferior to Prometheus.

I am sure Vuk would have supported my stand too; he would have argued passionately against any such simplification based on gender. He often questioned people's comprehension of the gender fluidity spectrum in which, he insisted, *animus* and *anima*, the masculine and feminine archetypes, were extreme and almost unattainable limits (or endpoints).

I navigated through the bulk of useless online posts, by filtering out those that contained primitive vocabulary and hateful speech against everything outside the boundaries of the secular. My Mia had been anything but gullible or susceptible to indoctrination. She was a gorgeous, self-conscious woman with a degree in botany and an obsessive passion (and talent) for modern dances. She was surrounded, at any given moment of time, by more friends than all the acquaintances I would have cumulatively made over the course of my entire lifetime.

In one online forum, crestfallen ex-boyfriends discussed the signs of withdrawal, aloofness and denial they had observed in their (already lost) partners. In another, a club of embittered wives mourned the irrationally large amounts of money their spouses donated to various schools of meditation. 'It is a scheme,' someone calling herself *Rational_Anna* wrote, confident she had cracked the psychology of both the conmen and the conned. 'They tell the new members that even the greatest knowledge, if given free, is not valued. They tell them that paying ensures they would appreciate more what they receive. And newbies believe it.'

Astonishingly, very few participants in those forums tried to understand the role they themselves played in the alienation drama of their partners. The default option was to blame something outside their homes, or someone other than themselves, all the while hoping that things would somehow turn all right. And just like alcohol, drugs, gambling and other addictions are often treated as some sort of evil spirits that lure innocent souls into sin, spiritual leaders are typically perceived as sly seducers of the human soul.

And so my personal investment in these forums was zilch, until one day a particular thread caught my attention.

Milan_Sirius: I am allergic to guys who who just keep whining when they get ditched. I just can't stand the attitude. Come on, are we still in high school? Grow up, man! Is there anything worse than this '*it's not about you, it's about me*' cliché? I can't believe people still buy it.

And, even if she *did* use those same words—for God's sake, save yourself the humiliation, and stop talking about it!

And you know what? If you could just accept the possibility that it might actually be about you, no-one would ever need to make up lousy excuses and say things such as '*I need some space and time to do some soul-searching to sort things out*' or any similar nonsense...

Suck it up. You have lost her.

Liam_1982: Wow, *Milan-Sirius*! Bra-vo! (followed by a *slow clap gif*)

Only a man who's been jilted once too many can articulate such a sharp rebuke. Let me ask you...do you actually hate or admire yourself?

Milan_Sirius: I hate to break it to you *Liam_1982*, but you'd better take a look at yourself.

You are here, reading my posts and even bothering to react. Obviously, you are not above any of this. I've spoken my mind—now, it's is totally up to you how you want to go about it.

Liam_1982: Seriously, *Milan_Sirius*? What are you, a preacher of some self-help, bullshit type of a philosophy?

Let me guess—you don't give a damn whenever a girl finds out you are an idiot and breaks up with you. You are fast to find a replacement, right?

Is that supposed to make you look cool?

If that's so, then you are in the wrong forum! This place is not meant for macho-degenerates who brag about their mastery in covert seduction techniques. If you are a serial womanizer, go find a place which is a better fit for someone of your breed!

Milan_Sirius: *Liam_1982*, chill, man!

Liam_1982: Rest assured, none of us is here to whine about being ditched for another guy. Families are getting uprooted for reasons so off-the-wall crazy, that one can neither mourn nor act on it. Losing a gal over another man entitles you to a whole array of an (otherwise) unreasonable behavior—you can curse, get drunk, indulge in either self-pity or promiscuity. But how do you go about your life when you don't even understand what really happened? Do you even have the capacity to understand what I am saying?

Milan_Sirius: *Liam_1982*, I am sorry, man, but I got to tell you that you have misunderstood me. I have no beef with you.

I am just a sweeper. Whatever I said was meant to chase away all the idiots who've infested this thread. Look at these forums, 99% of people here are either age-wise juvenile, or mind-wise infantile. Often both. I am so fed up of reading

trash posts. I am fed up of lads who turn a grain of sand into a boulder. Then they keep pussyfooting around, ready to neither take action, nor move on.

And just so I can prove to you that I am neither bullish nor stranger to this forum, I propose we started anew. I will share my story, and then you can judge whether I am posting in the right forum thread, or I belong elsewhere.

My girlfriend and I have been together for eleven years. We always thought we would eventually get married; but we needed to finish our studies first, get jobs and finally be financially independent. Before you began to laugh, let me tell you that, where I come from, those are no small matters. Somehow, step-by-step, we completed a few of those milestones. We even managed to rent an apartment, and already moved in together.

And just when I thought things were finally falling into their place, she made it clear she needed to have some sort of a late-twenties adventure. She said she'd always imagined traveling to India, of meeting palmists and astrologers, and maybe even a *guru*. Moreover, she insisted she had to go alone. *If that is how she feels now*, I thought, *I can only imagine what will happen after she gets an authentic foretaste of that world*.

I was still hoping for a miracle. I thought she would never go to India—she seemed too orthodox for a new religion, and perhaps financially too weak, to be able to afford a long-distance ticket. In a mere instant she gainsaid both my assumptions.

Liam_1982: Oh, man. Your story sounds so damn like mine! I don't know what ticked me off about you earlier. What do you say, should we call a truce?

Milan_Sirius: Sure, *Liam_1982*. Mind sharing your story then?

Liam_1982: All right, then. One day, out of the blue, my fiancé said she needed to go to Burma (alone, and for an indefinitely long period), in search for enlightenment.

In my early twenties, like many other young people, my friends and I travelled to Southeast Asia. In our minds, that part of the world was merely a synonym for a gap year from work or college. We had this vague idea of surfing on pristine beaches, having night parties, and getting cheap and easily available *ganja*.

A trip later and ten years down the road, ‘*going to the East*’ has actually become a red flag for something far less benign. In its capacity to freak a guy out, the line ‘*I’d like to travel to the East*’ has surpassed the ‘*I need some space*’ one. You let her go alone, and one of two things will happen. Either she won’t come back, or if she does, she’ll be so changed, that she would have lost any interest in staying with you.

Milan_Sirius: What makes you think anything’s changed? Your girl might simply be craving for some throwback hippie adventure. She could be back sooner than you expect, with her hair in dreadlocks, and no cash left in her pockets.

Liam_1982: You see, I know what’s going on in her mind. A couple of months ago she threw me off balance by her sudden interest in spirituality. She talked vaguely about the limits of sensuality, outgrowing materiality, and her last chance to get to grips with her—as she called it—*enduring discomfort*. She started talking about the boredom of her everyday routine. The way she described her life—our life—made me anxious. She compared us to tiny ants living in an anthill. She said we live in a complex structure of dark hallways that trick us into thinking that we are building something meaningful, when, in fact, we only keep moving, either in circles, or toward dead ends. The scary thing, though, is that none of this sounded like her. I have no idea where she picked these things from.

Milan_Sirius: I am sorry, man. I am afraid it does sound like she is hooked on some New Age idea.

Liam_1982: Well, I did try to act on it. I said I wanted to travel with her, but she did not allow it. I don't even know what I am hoping to achieve by reading through all these posts. I guess it is easier when you know that you are not the only one who's going through such a hell.

It was this uncommonly frank exchange between two shattered men that prompted me to assume a new avatar—I became *Aleph_null*, and quickly typed my response to the thread.

Aleph_null: *Liam_1982*, *Milan_Sirius*—How far would you be ready to go, in order to bring your girl back?

I waited for any one of them to reply. I was aware of the time gap—my post came a week after theirs. One week is not long for a thread to remain open. One week is nothing, unless one wrestles with brutal uncertainty which, in the case of these two men, was so obvious. The pain might have taken them into some other mode of coping with loss. I feared both of them might have permanently left the group; but two days later, *Aleph_null* was finally pinged.

Liam_1982: *Aleph_null*, please confirm that you do not belong to the following list: a relationship guru, a shrink, a private detective, a lawyer, or God forbid—a clairvoyant! I do not welcome an unsolicited advice coming from anyone from the above list!

Aleph_null: Does a mathematician have a say?

Milan_Sirius: Conditionally, the answer would be yes, unless you intend to be a smart-ass and calculate the odds of never seeing our girls again! Lol, couldn't

resist the sarcasm. But hey, what the hell! You'd be right to consider our reunion an almost impossible event.

Aleph_null: Well, my situation is no better than yours. And my odds too, are most likely worse than yours.

I, too, have recently lost someone, and I have my best friend to blame for that. But before you leap to any conclusion, let me be clear—no, he did not steal her. I know it is probably the first thing that came to your mind, but my case is somewhat different.

My friend used his eloquence and intelligence to seduce my girlfriend into the world of Orthodox Christianity. For hours, he told her stories about the faith of the passion bearers, the history of cenobitic monasticism, the power of prayer, and the wisdom of Christ's parables.

It did not take long before she decided to join a nun monastery in Southeast Europe, and start a life of celibacy.

So, *Milan_Sirius*, if you still want to know what I think the odds of getting your girl back are, I assure you they must be higher than mine.

Liam_1982: That sucks! This friend of yours—did he hold some grudge against you?

Milan_Sirius: Southeast Europe? My part of the world, man! Let me tell you—monasticism in the Eastern Orthodox Church *is* about cutting off all contacts with the outer world. She will probably live in seclusion, as a part of a sisterhood. I don't want to disappoint you. I just think that having the right information might help you better understand what you are dealing with.

You know, every year, a significant number of young people walk out of their homes to join a monastery, without telling anyone. Their families report a missing person, desperately search for weeks or months, until one day they

receive news that their dear one is now a monk or a nun in a monastery. I know this might not bring much of a relief to you, but at least your girl told you what she was up to.

Aleph_null: I know very well that I have lost her. I do not delude myself. That's the exact reason I've been reading these posts. Figured out I was a newbie in these matters.

Milan_Sirius: But you did ask how far we'd go to bring a woman back, right? Well, I was ready to take her to India myself. I wasn't sure I'd be able to afford the trip, but where there is a will there is also a way, right? I would have taken a loan. It could have turned into a romantic trip to the Taj Mahal. I would have taken her to the foothills of the Himalayas. We would have visited maybe a few ancient temples in the South. India would have been the perfect place to finally ask her to marry me.

But hers was a resolute *no*. She said a boyfriend would only distract her. She needed to travel solo and be one more greasy backpacker living on low budget who showers once every three days in some hostel or a homestay accommodation. She also said she planned a visit to a particular *ashram*, to experience sitting at the feet of some god-man.

So, what could I do? Insist on following her? I don't think it would have been a good idea. She would have gone berserk. She had already given me the name and the address of that *ashram*, saying that I should be content with knowing where exactly she would be. But I should not try to contact her in any way.

Liam_1982: Same thing happened to me. She didn't say *when* she would be back, but she did give me the details of the Buddhist monastery in Burma where she would be admitted. She said there would be no point in trying to call or write an email, as she intended to enter a state of silent, non-verbal retreat.

For a few days I couldn't stop thinking about the conversation. I knew well that my story with Mia was over, and I did not cultivate hope that she would, some day, return to me. I felt that, even if she eventually decided that the monastic life was not a good fit for her, she would refuse to go back to *us*, and to what her life used to be.

Besides, my pain was not of the kind that could be healed through her comeback. I had always been a proud man. Once the woman I loved decided to walk out on me, her act also put a categorical end to my involvement in the relationship.

I did not think my attitude had much to do with my capacity for forgiveness. The desertion, the betrayal, the farewell had filled me with such an unbearable sense of rust and decay. It was impossible to ever fully get rid of it. It carried her signature—her name, her smell, her temper. I knew it would tarnish even the most sublime moment any future might ever bring.

But those two men, *Milan_Sirius* and *Liam_1982*, were nothing like me. They were hurt, but not yet ready to abandon hope. They raged at the quandary, but still searched for a solution.

How can some (vague and illusory) vision of spiritual self-realization be stronger than one's feeling of belonging, stability and love? Mia had it all, yet she effortlessly tossed it all out. I knew I would never be able to critically and objectively process her reasons. One can't put the woman he has once loved under some sort of scientific scrutiny. It wouldn't be right. Besides, I was too much emotionally involved, too attached, too convinced that I have known her well. My confirmation bias would have eclipsed my perception.

Have I also been a victim of creeds? Have I not, myself, also searched for mystery and meaning in folklore, spiritual traditions, and sacred books? I always thought I was, if not an absolute atheist, then certainly a cynical agnostic; yet I never felt ready to take a firm stand. Soon after the breakup with Sybil, and right after my graduation, I travelled to India with a group of friends. Vuk did not join us; he said he was not yet ready to

experience the mysteries of the East. Neither was I, yet I decided to go, convinced I was actually going for an ordinary vacation to an exotic destination. I remember that we nearly added Burma to our itinerary; someone had told us that, somewhere in that unfathomable land, there was a giant statue of Buddha gilded in gold, whose teeth were meticulously cleaned with a large brush by the temple priests, in a ceremony performed every morning. The surreal vision of the ritual stuck with me for a very long time. But India was too much fun and too big to be seen in one go, so we decided to cancel the Burma plan.

What if I am now finally ready to delve into those spiritual traditions of the East? Everything I have experienced lately, this feeling of loss, alienation and intense difficulty, may be a sign that the time has come. I find Theo's techniques weird and dangerous, and there is no way I would join his circle of cobblers, musicians and burglars.

But then again, what if all this doesn't really matter? Maybe Theo knew it all along. Maybe he fulfilled a role he was meant to play on my path of transformation—to needle me, upset me, stir me, and then leave, making me believe that I was the one making all the decisions. Maybe it is time to move on. If Mia and so many other people could summon up courage and leave everything behind in pursuit for truth and meaning in their lives, then what is my excuse? Maybe the path towards the East is finally open to me.

With those thoughts, I finally fell asleep. In the morning, I knew I had made up my mind. I had cobbled together a plan of action which was impulsive, half-grown, and could in no way ensure that it wouldn't go out of control. Yet it was precisely for that reason that I clinched to the opportunity; I was ready, at last, to drop my inherited tendency of always choosing safety over chance.

.....

A month later, I took that long-overdue sabbatical leave, packed my bag, and left for India.

The last thing I did before giving the keys to Madam Paula—she insisted someone had to water the plants—was to send a short message to my virtual friends *Milan_Sirius* and *Liam_1982*.

Aleph_null: Guys, if she could do it, then so can I. I am going to the East. A spiritual search? Maybe. An adventure? I hope so. I am not sure why I am sharing this. I just thought you would understand. Stay well.

PART 2¹ : INDIA



‘Welcome to India,’ a young mustached officer behind the immigration desk greeted me, handing back my stamped passport. As I walked towards the security check scanners, I glanced back at the long queue of passengers, reminded at once of the scarcity of personal space I had to get used to. After all, this invasion of privacy is India’s way of telling you that everything Indian is about to get under your skin.

India is much of a strange land; it is perhaps the only place in the world that exists in so many differing yet synchronous forms. First, there is India of your imagination—the one cultivated by the stories you’ve heard, the books you have read, the dreams your inner eye has seen. Second, there is India you will *actually* witness, the perpetual kiss of opposites—India the magnificent and the lamentable, India the intimate and the daunting, India the modern and the chaotic. And then, there is India at its rough core; the one so paradoxical and complex, so raw and self-standing, that it has inevitably slipped the grip of the hearts and the minds of innumerable poets, hermits, philosophers, historians, warriors, and of course, politicians.

I have heard, many times, that this land is like a mirror, one that reflects, or rather throws back at you—with such a stern congruity—your current state of mind. But make no mistake—even if you brace yourself with all the psychological, philosophical and spiritual tools at your disposal, you can never be prepared for what awaits you. India is a manifold of beauty and of ugliness, and of million shades in-between, all of which exist in a *continuum*. India is like its gods and goddesses endowed with multitude of faces and plentitude of limbs, gorgeous and terrible, but absolutely complete.

My first (and till date the only) visit to this country, had made one thing very clear to me—the multitudes of India also revealed my own multitudes. I understood that there was that old *I*, the one that existed *before* the journey. I can describe that old identity as a primal, limited, and a deeply egotistic one. During my time in India, a new *I* surfaced. It was a lot more open than the old one, at times susceptible to spells of euphoria, at others vulnerable up to the fringes of the bearable. But it is the third *I*, the post-India one, which is hardest to explain. *That I* resembles a dog with a bone between its teeth, still clinging on the taste of the flesh long gone. *That I* has an inflated sense of having experienced something far beyond the mundane, a treasure that should not be left behind. It takes too long for that new *I* to realize that it has, in all likelihood, misperceived and misunderstood almost everything. Still, that third *I* knows that *there is* something beyond the limits of life as it now is, the allure of which, moving forward, will be difficult to entirely ignore.

.....

Is there anyone who hasn't wished to see India at least once in a lifetime? And yet, here I was again, for such a strange reason. The first time I set foot in India I was young and embarrassingly foolish. My friends and I embarked on a month long, two-part vacation. In the first half of our trip, we trekked through the virgin terrains and remote villages of the North. In the second, we discovered the beaches on the west coast, and indulged in surfing and coral reefs exploration.

Even though my heart was never beating in the rhythm of the Beatles and the hippies, I almost effortlessly fell prey to the hypnotism of the orange-clad *sadhus* at the foothills of the Himalayas. I watched them as they sat alone and quiet in the depths of their tiny caves where we occasionally barged in. I watched them as they soberly carried their clinking metal buckets and fetched water directly from the silvery waters of the fierce, glacier-cold Ganges. I watched them as they meditated day in and day out, and I remember wondering if they ever slept like ordinary men do. Among them, a hermit woman wrapped in black drapes, with an open hair tangled in elflocks and covered in

ashes, noticed my gaze and just wouldn't let it go. With the most piercing eyes I have ever seen, she scoffed at me as if I were no more than a pitiful aquatic insect about to be swallowed by the freshet. Alas, how many nights afterwards I saw that woman in my dreams, frightened and beguiled by her mighty eyes, and doubting if she had ever been real. My friends claimed they never saw her, and goaded me into a belief that she was nothing but *leela*, a divine playfulness by which the universe revealed the current focus of my mind and the wants of my body.

When, many years later, I met Mia, I thought she was the earthy doppelgänger of that ineffable woman from the Himalayas. The blackness of Mia's inky eyes and raven hair dismantled every bit of my mind and my soul; and before I could figure out a way to put myself together again, she walked away.

Having come back home after my backpacking stint in India, for a brief while I was on the verge of becoming obsessed with *yoga*, *mantras* and *transcendental meditation*; but for all that, my best friends' interests remained downright opposite. In the end, I chose the path more travelled, the reason of the group over my inner voice, even though I knew I was missing out on something of greater substance.

Two decades separate me from that foolishness of my youth, but the moment I set my foot on this soil again, I recognized *the smell* all the same. It is that very same smell, I know, that brought back all those memories, sweet and sour. No other place in the world smells like it. Many have tried to describe this humid mixture of bloom and rot, sweat and coal, luxury and misery—and all such efforts have proved futile. The truth is, you can't help but both detest and love that scent. You think you forget it when you leave it behind, but the moment you are back—years, decades, or a lifetime later—you realize it had always lingered, wrapped around your memories like a smolder of a temple incense, or a smoke of burning cow dung.

And let me be straight—everyone, absolutely and without exception everyone, at some point in time, either exoticizes or demonizes this land. The reaction is visceral, almost irrational and impossible to muzzle. Even now, I am convinced that this attitude is

more of an atavistic response to a powerful experience, rather than a face of some clichéd occidental bias.

.....

Compared to my first trip from a decade ago, the new ease of planning the journey and traveling through India in some way spoilt the fun. The process missed the thrill of imagining the unknown. Globetrotting today does not make for an exciting travelogue at all. It creates social media posers and influencers, but rarely spellbinding storytellers. We live in a sad age of attention deficit, competition surplus and vanity overflow.

My arrangements were fast and simple: I decided to join a large, well-known *ashram* in the South. Through the *ashram*'s website, I registered for a three-week *yoga* retreat for beginners (read: for *firangis*, the word Indians love to use for foreigners), and took a deep breath before I hit the *proceed* button to complete my online payment.

I believed to be undertaking this journey for my own wellbeing. Maybe, I thought, I not only needed, but also deserved a spiritual recess much more than Mia ever did. It could be that I wanted to give India one more chance, and finally drop that feeling of having had missed a distant call, or having had rejected something that could change my destiny.

There were three things I promised myself not to carry with me on my journey: any pair of Bermuda pants, a camera, and an attitude given to a culture shock. The first restriction was partly health-motivated (even though I was not traveling to a malaria-endemic region, I was still very uncomfortable with the odds of catching some mosquito-borne disease, such as *dengue* or *chikungunya*). The other reason for my self-imposed ban on midi and short-length pants came from an observation I had made during my first trip to the East. I remember that almost all the foreign tourists whom my friends and I met at that time wore such pants, and looked ridiculously out of place. The second restriction, or rather a firm resolution to leave my camera behind, was motivated by an intention to carry less weight, spend no time in pursuit of aesthetics,

and record as little evidence of my journey as possible. The third restriction seemed the most reasonable but also the least realistic, due to my insatiable susceptibility to stimuli and impressions.

.....

On my way to the East, I wore my most optimistic avatar. And yet, challenges were thrown at me even before I landed in India. An Indian gentleman, seated next to me on the plane, engaged in what appeared to be small talk. But when he enquired about the purpose of my visit, and after he heard I was headed to a *yoga centre*, he gave a speech as acidic as green limes.

‘The *ashram* is the last refuge for those who have not yet gone mad,’ he said. ‘It comes as no surprise that bright people like you are running away from society. The world has become a cold and cruel place. We have all succumbed to a dangerous anomie of the majority.

‘The highest good, the *summum bonum* of our civilization, no longer has anything to do with ethics. It is a trident of money, success and power. We are limpid consumers who find human suffering inconspicuous. We are slow to act upon injustice, and quick to enfeeble any faith in fairness. Under the pretense of a compassion fatigue, we justify our indifference and lack of empathy. We are fastidious about our money, but slovenly about others’ property or rights.

‘We chuck away our feelings, as if they were tarnished trinkets, and stick to our condescending attitude towards the poor, the ill and the unfortunate. We’ve become masters of snide remarks against the have-nots. The lazy poor man is our favorite trope. And then we corral those who question and doubt these “ways of modernity” towards the margins, where they can stay unheard and invisible.

‘We are reminded that we are free; yet “take it or leave it” and “my way or the highway” is the *Hobson’s choice* we are presented with every day. And then, of course, we are also reminded that we would be better off if we grew a thick (and preferably white) skin.

‘To continue living in this world without frayed nerves or a broken heart means one either lacks consciousness or conscience—while probably both.’

I listened patiently; what other choice did I have on an eight-hour flight? But then the man added something which I had not expected at all. He labelled my spiritual journey to India an out to out anachronism.

‘You are fifty years late,’ he said.

‘Late for what?’ I asked.

‘Late to come to India in search of spirituality. Do you still believe in authentic *gurus*?’ It was, of course, a rhetorical question.

‘You really shouldn’t,’ he was quick to add. ‘They are saints who travel money-free, but always on business class and escorted by a man with a bag (or an account) full of cash. They pander only to the rich and the powerful. So many of them are accused of sexual abuse, but so very few are actually convicted. They pay no taxes, yet they are so fond of entrepreneurship. And of course, they and their followers become truculent every time someone challenges their ideology.’

‘But there is nothing surprising in any of this. Such “masters” are a perfect fit for people like us. We detest truth. We are content with fraudsters.’

‘Fifty years ago, one still stood a chance to encounter a genuine Master. But you are late, my friend. I am afraid you might be too late.’

.....

My old friends would probably be disappointed if they came to know that I went to India but renounced all the cheap thrills on the way. This time I neither became a train roof rider nor got stoned among the (mostly bogus) wandering *sadhus*. I stayed away from poverty tourism, voluntourism, staged orphanages and fake charities. I did not go to Agra to see the Taj Mahal, nor to the streets of Jaipur, to roam the markets of clothes and gems. I did not succumb to the lure of the westernized eateries in the shiny,

multistorey malls. There were no Himalayas and no coral reefs. I did not want any distractions, and I found the simplest, fastest, and probably the most expensive way to reach my destination—a local flight to the nearest connectable city, followed by a taxi ride to the remote and secluded green *ashram* complex.



‘Welcome to our Centre,’ a young, serene-looking Indian woman greeted me at what seemed to be the Reception Desk. Later that week, I learned that her name was Sneha, and that she was one of the fifty volunteers who had come to the *ashram* to do *karma yoga*, a form of spiritual practice focused on selfless serving. ‘How was your journey? Did you have any difficulties finding us?’ she asked.

‘Not at all,’ I replied, offering my passport and a copy of my online registration form. ‘I hired an experienced driver. But, should I worry? Am I late?’

‘No, no,’ she smiled. ‘You should neither worry nor hurry here,’ her words sounded like a *mantra*. ‘You are just on time. The program will begin at 7:00 p.m. with a *satsang* in the main hall. It’s almost five now, so you have enough time to get comfortable in your room and take a short rest.’ As she handed over my room keys and a lanyard with my ID, she went on to explain the shortest way to my room.

This was not a hotel, so there was no porter to help me with the luggage. Fortunately, I did not carry much with me.

‘Ah, one more thing, Alexander,’ the receptionist called out just as I was about to leave, ‘You may want to find a place for your *yoga* mat inside the meditation hall, before the start of the session. It will be crowded later, so if I were you, I’d reserve my spot right now, on the way towards the room.’

I thanked her, not fully convinced in the importance of her pointers. But since I anyway carried my *yoga* bag separately, and had to pass by the meditation hall on my way to the residential blocks, I thought there was no harm in doing what she had recommended. I thought I would still get at least an hour and a half to shower and take a short rest.

As I approached the meditation hall, I found myself in front of massive teakwood entrance doors carved with images of Hindu gods and goddesses. But I also felt too tired to study the architecture and the interior design.

The hall was almost empty, and a gust of incense stroke my nostrils. The first thing I noticed was the central stage, where a king-sized, ornate armchair was placed, along with a set of large framed photos of *Swamiji* and other *yoga* masters of his spiritual lineage. The high ceiling was ornate too, with depictions of *yogis* in meditative state, the symbol *aum*, and other similar spiritual iconography. There were flowers everywhere, especially garlands—some made of yellow and orange marigolds, others of jasmine and roses.

I decided I would be having plenty of time to analyze (and perhaps appreciate the esthetics of) the interior later, and so I tried to quickly find a place for my belongings. Almost fully covered in *yoga* mats of all possible colors and dimensions, the floor resembled a large mosaic, or a puzzle board, with only a few tiles missing. I glanced through the available spots and I finally chose a place somewhere in the middle, expecting it to be ideal for two reasons: one, its proximity to the stage would allow me to see *Swamiji* and get acquainted with the dynamics of this *yoga* school; and two, it was a good vantage point to scan much of the hall, and observe people. *If I am lucky or blessed*, I thought, *I might also figure out my own place and purpose in this strange puzzle.*

.....

My accommodation looked like a little summer hut; a tiny, one-bedroom house, surrounded by three large coconut trees and a mini garden with a bush of white, very fine-smelling flowers. The hut was powered by a solar panel, with no air conditioning except for the ceiling fan which pushed around the same heavy, sticky air. I took a quick shower, set the phone alarm to 6:30 p.m., ensuring that the volume was at a maximum. Semi-sun-stricken and exhausted, I feared I might sleep through the alarm.

Fortunately, I managed to wake up on time, freshen up and make myself a cup of tea. I put on an ochre shirt and a pair of loose pants (in hope I would fit in well if I looked

authentic enough). At 6:45 p.m. I headed towards the meditation hall, carrying nothing but a small bottle of water. I was all set to begin my '*Physical, Mental & Spiritual Rejuvenation Through Yoga Program.*'

Perhaps I should not forget to mention that spiritual rejuvenation is a very costly affair, or a luxury hobby. Whoever still thinks that there is nothing easier than giving up everything, leaving your job behind, and turning a new page in your life by becoming a *yogi*, is gullible, idealistic and, above all, uninformed. My airfare and the fees for the three-week program at the *ashram* cost me more than a two-month salary.

On the *ashram*'s website, there was a '*Calendar of Events*' that covered the whole year. The dropdown menu listed short-term and long-duration programs; beginners, intermediate and advanced-level courses; special events like *pujas* and *yajnas*³⁷; exclusive *darshans*³⁸ with *Swamiji*; *Vastu Shastra*³⁹ trainings; group chantings, scriptures reading, and many, many more. In order to spend a year at the *ashram*, I thought, a student of *yoga* would need a small fortune.

So much for the hippie, low-budget, backpacker-style of experiencing the mysticism of the East. It was during that first week in India, that I also found out that more than half of the Indian attendees of the program were high-tech IT engineers and other high-income professionals, employees of multinational companies, who flocked to the *ashram* in pursuit of meditation techniques that could reduce stress, increase productivity and tap into inner sources of creativity.

On my first night at the *ashram*, the crowd I found in front of the hall was mind-blowing. I was not in a hurry to enter, but I also did not want to be late, and so I tried to find a queue to stand in. I quickly learned that—with very few exceptions which are not even worth mentioning—to expect a functional queue in India is pretty much equivalent to hoping that a drop of liquid mercury will remain still. That evening I earned a couple of serious upper arm bruises and a swollen toe, curtesy of the forceful devotees who could not wait to see *Swamiji* and begin to rejuvenate. About half of the

attendees were foreigners like me. Yet there was barely any observable difference in the amount of enthusiasm each group displayed.

When I finally managed to get in, I was faced with another challenge—I wasn't able to locate my mat and cushion in-between all those comfortably seated meditators. Tiptoeing across the hall, I somehow recognized my *yoga* accessories rumpled and thrown at least six feet behind the spot where I had originally put them.

Once I sat down, I quietly observed the people around me, trying to come to terms with the social dynamics that had caught me off-guard. I barely glanced at faces, but every time someone caught me in the act, they responded with a smile, a behavior I found oddly incongruous with the rout experienced at the front door, just a few minutes earlier.

I was still holding a long-stem rose given to me at the entrance. There must have been at least four to five hundred people inside the hall, and they each carried a flower. The man who gave it to me also explained that the flower would be my personal offering to *Swamiji*. He said each of us would receive a *darshan* later that evening and that, on such an occasion, gifting a flower to the *guru* was a sign of openness, devotion and receptivity. He also remarked that I should resist smelling the flower, since its scent, too, was part of the offering. With so many roses around, everything smelled of them anyway, so it was difficult to appreciate the logic of this argument. Besides, the stem of my rose got broken, probably at the time I had struggled to find my way through the crowd; seeing its condition, I now doubted if my flower was really imbued with the noblest of human emotions.

Swamiji finally entered the hall, and everyone became silent at once. Dressed in all shades of orange and yellow, with palms closed and pressed against their chest, and with eyes either teary or closed, their postures followed *Swamiji's* movement like a sunlit field of sunflowers. Many fell at his feet, asking for his blessings. *Swamiji's* walk was slow and graceful, and once he reached the center and sat comfortably on his large, ornamental dais covered in silk brocade, he lovingly looked at the audience and made a

few hand gestures, following which everybody got seated on the floor. Probably in his late fifties or early sixties, *Swamiji* wore an impressively dense, grey beard, and an impenetrable charisma of a mystic. His orange attire, coupled with strings of crystal and wooden beads around his neck, instantaneously gave me a flashback of my backpacking days at the source of the river Ganges.

That evening, *Swamiji*'s discourse (if at all one), was quite brief. He announced a cultural program, and introduced the artists. He talked about the *gates* which channel the divine energy into the human existence. He said that, in order to become complete, every human being had to maintain those gates open, by nurturing various artistic, sport, and intellectual skills. Through music and dance, he argued, one's entire being becomes perceptive beyond the five senses, and opens up to new dimensions of life. *Swamiji* used very few words and a simple language which, altogether did not make much of an impression. The cultural program, though, turned out nice. There was a *Bharatanatyam*⁴⁰ performance, followed by a *bhajan*⁴¹ concert, and it continued till nine. It was then suddenly announced that a queue would be formed, and everyone who wished to get a *darshan* would be given a few seconds to receive *Swamiji*'s blessings.

Surprisingly, this time the queue looked perfect. People hurried to reserve an early spot, but once in the queue, they did not deviate. I remained seated, looking at the serpentine row of *yogis*, each carrying a flower. I thought that, if I joined, I would be in the very tail of the snake. I felt my stomach growling, and I suddenly remembered that I hadn't eaten anything since morning. At nine in the evening, I was sure, the restaurant or the mess (as they commonly refer to the cafeteria here) must be long closed.

Holding my pathetic broken rose, and trying to decide whether to remain seated or go back to my room, I saw a woman approach.

'Would you like to join the queue,' she asked. 'You can come with me, if you wish.'

Without even taking a proper look at her, I tried to politely wave aside her invitation. 'Thank you, but you can carry on without me,' I said. 'It is my first day at the *ashram*, so

I'd rather stay back and just watch everything from here.' I was in no mood to engage in any conversation yet.

We were surrounded by so many people who were moving around in search for a place in the queue. It was thus very easy to use the crowd as an excuse to be less friendly. But the woman persisted in her effort to *socialize* me.

'You can have my rose,' she said, 'if you are bothered with yours.' She had obviously noticed my fidgeting with the broken stem, and had mistaken my hesitation for a discomfort with the condition of the flower.

'Ah, no,' I insisted, 'that is all right. I just don't feel comfortable enough to approach *Swamiji* yet. I think I'll be ready in a couple of days.'

She guffawed at my reply. I am not sure if her gesture was offensive or just a bit too friendly.

'Come on,' she insisted with a surprising assertion. 'Have you ever been in love?' she threw an unexpected provocation, and waited for my gawky reaction.

I threw a raised eyebrow back at her.

She smiled and said something that was probably meant to sound profound. 'I hope you are not bothered with my directness,' she said. 'Becoming a disciple is so much like falling in love. Or taking a leap of faith. You cannot prepare. You cannot take only one step at a time. It happens, and you realize—at once—that you belong.'

'Maybe I do not belong yet,' I replied.

'It could be,' she smiled. 'If that is the case, relax and just be open to whatever comes.'

I nodded, relieved we finally agreed on something. I did not really like her assertiveness, but nevertheless, her social confidence impressed me.

'I am Alexandra,' she said, offering her hand. 'And today I am completing my first month here.'

‘Cool! And I am Alexander,’ I said, shaking hands.

We both laughed.

‘I try to remain at the center of all happenings, whenever I can; so I must join that queue. I know, I know, it sounds terrible,’ she added with a winsome smile. ‘One should leave the ego at the doorsteps of this place, but I cannot help. All of this is so exciting, and I don’t want to miss a single thing. Hope to see you around!’

I was too tired, grumpy and hungry to analyze my first impressions of Alexandra. But I was content. I was undoubtedly on the right track. To be welcomed by a namesake in that new place was no short of synchronicity, and thus not a small thing, even to a *yoga* newbie.



‘People often say that having the right intention may be a good thing, but still too small, for any meaningful change to take place. I say, do not underestimate its power. The right intention, or the right aspiration, is like a seed, and the seed is the most powerful thing in the world—it is pure energy, a potential programmed to manifest its destiny. Throw it in the depth of the dark soil, and it will germinate, grow and transform into a tall, fruit-bearing tree. Each season you’ll admire the blossoming of its fragrant flowers, you’ll see a million opiated bees dancing around it in joy, you’ll taste its fruits, and you’ll take rest in its shade—yet you will rarely remember the place this magnificent tree came from—a single seed, small enough to fit under your nail. So, find the right seed and find the right soil, and you can be sure to witness not just a change, but a miracle.’ With these words, *Swamiji* concluded his response to a question from one of his disciples, and announced he would move on to the next one. The evening discourse was in full swing, and the Master was offering *darshan*, distributing *prasad*⁴² and clearing doubts from the hearts and the minds of his followers.

‘Come, you have to hear this,’ Alexandra insisted. ‘*Swamiji*’s words are so inspiring,’ she did everything to convince me to attend that particular session. Three days into my *Rejuvenation Program*, Alexandra and I were already friends. Perhaps she thought of herself as some sort of a self-appointed peer or a buddy, trying to smoothen my entry into the world of *yoga* mats, vegan food and wise proverbs. Once or twice I even suspected her of engineering her way into a fake friendship. But why would she do that? If her friendliness was just a deception, what mission could she have possibly had?

I had heard the seed metaphor many times before, and my natural response to *Swamiji*’s statement was to just flout at it. The moral parables, whether they belong to the Judeo-Christian, Hindu or any other tradition, always share a common thread—they appeal

through their oversimplified parallels to natural processes and phenomena. No, *the lily of the valley* might not toil or spin, but neither do any other flowers, however graceful or gaudy they may appear. The seed which falls onto the ground sometimes transforms into a fruit-bearing tree, and sometimes into a parasitic weed. Finally, let us also consider the seed called *human*. We can easily agree that this seed carries such a corrupt moral genome, that the Earth would be far better off if the *Cosmic Tree* which produces it was left barren.

Surrounded by at least five hundred *yoga* practitioners who silently listened to *Swamiji*'s discourse, I knew I couldn't afford to speak my mind openly and loudly.

'Is this what impresses you so much?' I whispered in her ear, questioning her taste in spiritual novelty. 'If you needed to hear this kind of stories, you didn't have to come here. You could have read The New Testament, or Rumi's poetry, or the scripts of the European Alchemists.'

'Not *that*, you fool!' Alexandra laughed with a mischievousness of a teenage troublemaker, and punched my shoulder playfully. I was fascinated by her unmannered communication, her casual choice of words, and her ease of making friends. She was the prototype of the girl-next-door. Pretty, chatty, easygoing.

'Did I miss something?' I was surprised by her reaction.

'You bet you did! Now come with me,' she pulled me, and we sneaked out of the meditation hall.

She led me towards the market stalls placed just a dozen feet away from those large teakwood doors. It was a place where one could find almost anything—from books on *yoga* to *Ayurvedic*⁴³ hair oil to *samosas* and *jalebis*.

'Look,' she said, guiding me towards a jewelry stand. She showed me strings of wooden beads, some made into bracelets, others into long necklaces. I had seen those practically everywhere—*Swamiji* wore a couple of those, as did almost everyone who attended the seminar.

‘Do you know what these beads are?’ she tested me.

‘Rosary beads?’ I tried the obvious.

‘In a way yes,’ she smiled. ‘They are used in *mantra* chanting. But they are much, much more. They call them the *Tears of Shiva*⁴⁴. They are known as *rudraksha*, and they are seeds of a holy tree. If you ask me, then *this* is the ultimate seed, the one *Swamiji* talks about, and much, much more!’

I smiled. I would have much rather laughed, but I did not want to irritate the man in charge of the stall, a serene-looking *yogi* who silently yet suspiciously inspected my conduct.

‘Are you serious?’ I asked. ‘Back in there, I already told you what I think of that metaphysical hooey. Are you actually trying to drill into me the message of the seed?’

‘Okay,’ she replied, ‘Are you always so stiff? I haven’t finished yet. Here, let me show you.’

She took two of the bracelets from the stall, one with small and the other one with slightly larger beads. ‘Do you see any difference between these two?’ she asked.

‘Of course,’ I replied, somewhat edgy. ‘Even a blind person would see a difference in their size.’

‘It’s more than just the size,’ she shook her head. ‘Here, take this one,’ she handed over to me one of the bracelets. ‘Now, choose a bead, and look at it closely. Do you see the separators?’

Indeed, each seed had meridian-looking rafts. They sagely reminded me of the structure of a peeled tangerine. I shared my observation.

‘Exactly! Now count how many slices there are in total!’

‘Five, I think.’

‘Yes. Most of the *malas*⁴⁵ you will find around here are made of five-faceted beads. They are called *panch-mukhi rudraksha*, which means a *rudraksha* seed with five faces. It is believed to be the most conducive seed for spiritual practice. Now, look at this one,’ she pulled away my bracelet and replaced it with another one. ‘Now, how many faces does this one have?’

I counted, and come to seven. To make sure I was right, I moved to another bead and counted one more time. ‘Seven,’ I said, this time confidently.

‘You said this one had larger seeds, and you were right, it does. This one is considered a *rudraksha* of *Lakshmi*, the goddess of wealth. But let us see how much each bracelet costs.’

She turned towards the tall, now already frowning *yogi*, and asked the price of each bracelet. Twenty dollars for the first one, he said. A hundred and twenty for the second.

‘Now, I do not know what you heard during the *satsang*,’ Alexandra said after we stepped aside, far enough from the *yogi*’s scrutinizing eyes. ‘But I can tell you what I’ve been hearing again and again, in the words of that holy man. I hear a business opportunity.’

She got me there. I was surprised.

‘You know,’ she continued, ‘people say that this is the era of artificial intelligence, big data and machine learning—but throw a single good look at that meditation hall, and you will easily see that another world coexists, parallel to this high-tech one.’

‘The market for all things spiritual is thriving—people seek traditional medicine, believe in *kundalini*⁴⁶, or just hope to find a lucky charm. Paradoxically, while doing all this, they claim they prefer the spiritual over the materialistic path. But are they any better than treasure hunters who take a path less travelled? In the end of the day, all they really want is a blessing from a *guru*, a few *karma* points, and a pocket full of abundance-vibrating seeds. Why? So that, once they leave this *ashram* and go back to their world in which only money and success count, they can have some head start.

‘So, the market of metaphysical and spiritual items is a robust one. It thrives upon that spiritual greed I have just described. The first time you saw those *rudraksha* seeds, you thought they were bagatelle, right? But you see, not all seeds were created equal. These ones cost a fortune. To begin with, I would like to try to grab a slice of that market. Why not seize the opportunity?’

‘So, you are not here for *yoga*?’ I said just to needle her.

‘Oh yes, I am,’ she smiled, effortlessly dismissing my provocation. ‘This is such a wonderful retreat! But I am also here to earn my *yoga* teacher certificate, to earmark a couple of business opportunities, and obviously, to get some new ideas! I dream big, you know,’ she punched my shoulder again, laughing in her typical, playful way.

‘So, in this spiritual market of yours—what will you trade with?’ I continued.

‘Well,’ she said and made an intentional pause, as if trying to emphasize the importance of what came next, ‘five minutes ago you found out the market value of a single seed, and you still don’t know what’s on my mind?’

‘You want to turn into a trader of *rudraksha* beads?’

‘Yes, that could be a start,’ she replied, at the same time nonchalantly tying her long hair into a high ponytail. I saw a voguish ॐ tattoo on the back of her neck. She could easily pass for a bohemian-style model of some New Age magazine. I gazed at all those tiny strings of coral, lapis and turquoise beads around her neck and wrists.

‘There are also crystals, *fengshui* items, jewelry and many other things to consider,’ she added.

For a brief moment she daringly stared at me, and then threw in another challenge. ‘If you wish, you can join me. I could use a partner in my new enterprise. We could name it *Alex&Alex*, what do you think?’

.....

My first impressions from India were as straight as my favorite *shavasana*⁴⁷ pose, and as brief as a *kapalabhati*⁴⁸ exhalation. This is what I wrote in my journal:

I met an interesting woman. At first I was afraid that she might try to convert me into a yogi, but I was wrong. She is not that much into yoga, after all. A child of capitalism, she has entrepreneurial inclinations. I like her Slavic accent. And her neck of a gazelle.



Hazelnuts

For almost a week I got up at *Brahma Muhurta*, an hour-and-a-half before sunrise. That is the divine time, the hour of *Brahma*, the Creator-God of the sacred Hindu trinity. *Brahma Muhurta* is the best time to pray, meditate and practice *yoga asanas*, *Swamiji* said. Our morning sessions were outdoors, on the grass, and under the open sky which, in the minutes before sunrise, always dramatically changed its light, colors and saturation.

My biorhythm was at fierce war with this new requirement. Every muscle and bone, each ligament and a nerve rioted against my will to begin the day in the spirit of the wise Indian *yogis*. I harassed my body, determined not to be held hostage to its preference for the path of least resistance. I tried to do each and every *yoga* pose with greatest possible precision. I became a cat and a rabbit, an eagle and a crow, a snake and a crocodile, a locust and a frog⁴⁹. Yet that cat seemed lazy, the rabbit old, the eagle misbalanced, the crow dead, the snake stiff, the crocodile agitated, the locust meek, and the frog—absolutely ridiculous. A strange regret sneaked up on my mind—*what if I have started yoga too late? What if I was already too old for all this? What if the path of the yogi was to be started in the late teens or in the early twenties?*

‘You are one hell of a butterfly⁵⁰,’ Alexandra whispered to me, laughing at my hopelessly inelastic hips and thighs. In this beautifully-named sitting pose, one pulls the legs towards the body, holds the feet pressed against one another, and then moves the knees up and down, like wings of a butterfly, making sure they get as close to the ground as possible. My knees never touched the ground.

Trying to hush Alexandra was of no use. She always placed her mat close to mine, and I felt objectified when she analyzed the limits of my body. Nevertheless, apart from the

evening talks, this was our only common session throughout the day, and I wouldn't have missed it for a thing.

Alexandra was an advanced practitioner; to her my struggles with *Surya Namaskar*⁵¹ looked no more serious than the pain of loose milk teeth. She diligently attended the teacher certification track, earning her credentials and staying exceptionally fit.

'Hey, *yogi*,' she buzzed me again. 'Meet me at lunch. There is someone I'd like you to meet.'

I nodded silently, trying to hold my breath. I didn't want her to see that the *asanas* had taken me beyond my physical threshold, and that, instead of enduring this pain, I would have rather stopped, sat down, and just heavily breathed for ten minutes. She quickly folded her mat and walked away, saying she needed to go somewhere.

.....

The meeting took place at noon, over lunch, in the *ashram's* spacious canteen. I was introduced to Tej, a guy from Nepal, an attendee of a two-week *yoga* retreat. Tej said he wasn't a newbie but a mid-level practitioner of *yoga* who, in his own words, tried to integrate the ancient knowledge of wellbeing into everyday life. This was his fifth visit to the Centre.

'It's not the same with me,' I responded. 'It's been a week, but my body is still stiff. Those morning sessions are killing me.'

'No need to force it,' he replied. 'It'll come. All you need to do is remain aware during those postures. Be aware of your breath, aware of your restlessness, aware of every little tension in your body, as you assume the *asana*. That awareness is the real thing about *yoga*. Remember, you are not a circus acrobat. Besides, you won't make a living by performing some topsy-turvy maneuvers.'

Interesting, I thought. Everyone here thinks he is an expert. And, who mentioned making money out of yoga anyway?

‘So, Tej, you promised to tell me about your growing business,’ Alexandra inquired.

‘Well,’ Tej showed off his irritatingly perfect set of white teeth, ‘I must say things are, so far, moving really well. In less than two years we have doubled our pool of suppliers, and we are now sourcing some of the finest *rudraksha* from more than twenty villages. No more middlemen—we buy directly from the farmers.’

‘Awesome,’ Alexandra’s eyes glittered with a seductive mix of flattery and greed. ‘You can now control the quality of the beads, *and* get a higher margin, I suppose.’

‘Frankly speaking,’ Tej replied, ‘I was more concerned with the authenticity of those *rudraksha* beads that we used to buy. You see, with wholesale procurement through intermediaries, chances are high that, once in a while, you buy a few lots of fake seeds. When you deal directly with a farmer, that is never the case.’

‘What’s a fake *rudraksha*?’ I asked, not able to comprehend the possibility of a counterfeit biological material in the context of sacred beads.

I did not like the high-blown sneer in his reply. ‘Are you kidding? When the price of a single *rudraksha* can reach a few *lakh*⁵² rupees, the market is, understandably, saturated with imitations.’

‘The other day Tej was teaching me how to recognize a genuine bead of good quality,’ Alexandra mollified the tension. ‘In fact, that’s how Tej and I met. I was going to buy a couple of bracelets for myself from that mini-market in front of the meditation hall. Tej saw my indecisiveness, and figured out I was new to the world of *rudraksha*. He shared some useful tips.’

He is quite a charmer, and he is definitely flirting, I was thinking, noticing the way he smiled back at her. With fake modesty, he dismissed her appreciation of his expertise. ‘Ah, don’t mention it at all,’ he said, ‘it was the least I could do. Besides, you were buying *panch-mukhi* beads, not some rare, collector items. And from what I saw, you have quite an eye for *rudrakshas*. With just a little bit of practice, you can easily surpass me as a connoisseur of sacred beads.’

For the rest of our oil-free, raw/boiled, low-calorie and healthy vegan lunch, Tej spoke about the many ways in which unscrupulous traders manufacture bogus *rudraksha* beads. He talked of similar-looking seeds of some poisonous tree that could easily fool the untrained eye. Fake multi-faceted beads, he said, can be created from two or more seeds, carefully cut and then glued together. Sometimes, forgers also carve additional rims on a seed. Even more interesting are the methods used to detect such counterfeit items—the techniques range from a use of powerful magnifying glasses to boiling the seed for several hours until the glue melts to using magnets and X-rays.

‘Excuse my ignorance,’ I interrupted him, without feeling any shame or a guilt, ‘but I find it difficult to understand—why do people pay such a high price for a tree seed?’

‘Three reasons,’ he was quick to respond. ‘For one, there is a very strong mythological and spiritual significance attributed to the *rudraksha* and, therefore, the beads have acquired a status of sacred objects. For two, it is believed that some *rudraksha* seeds (like those with more than ten *mukhis*) can protect against any malefic influence, and can bestow on their owner success and material wealth, magnetic attractiveness, or potent spiritual insights. For three, since some multi-faceted *rudraksha* seeds can be extremely difficult to find, the law of supply and demand clearly explains how these seeds become treated as rare, and thus luxury, items.’

‘One more thing,’ I said, ‘and I promise this will be my last...’

‘By all means.’

‘If these seeds are so powerful,’ I said, ‘then every farmer in those villages you are sourcing from would be famous, rich and enlightened. All it takes is to plant a few *rudraksha* trees, right?’

He just smiled, unprovoked. I know what you are doing, his sparkling eyes were saying, but I am not that naive.

‘Alexandra, your friend is smart. I can see why you are fond of him,’ he said.

‘Most *rudraksha* seeds are very common and, consequently, quite cheap. For example, you can buy a *panch-mukhi rudraksha mala*, a rosary of 108 seeds, in less than ten dollars,’ he finally replied. ‘In addition, the value of a seed depends not just on the number of faces, but on other factors as well, such as the size, the symmetry of the bead, and distinctiveness of the rafts. So, not every *rudraksha* tree yields highly valued seeds.’

‘What about those farmers who are lucky enough to find such a rare-type of a seed?’ I was not giving up.

‘Well, a few among them have earned a fortune. Literally. Every once in a while, you hear of a poor farmer whose *rudraksha* tree, planted by his grandfathers long ago, suddenly started yielding thousands of seeds. His *karma* was good, the gods smiled at him, and he proved the belief that some beads can truly make a man rich.’

.....

‘So, what do you think of Tej?’ Alexandra asked me in the evening.

‘He looks cunning enough to be successful,’ I replied.

‘Aren’t you mean!’ she laughed my comment off.

‘And why did you want me to meet him?’

‘Isn’t it obvious? He could easily become my supplier—or ours, if you decide to join me.’

‘Supplier of *rudraksha* beads?’

‘Yes. He sells across Asia. We can do something about Europe.’

‘What if he’s eyeing your region too?’

‘He isn’t. He himself told me he won’t. At this point, he does not have the infrastructure to expand. Moreover, he is not comfortable with the legal and regulatory aspects of foreign markets.’

‘Cool. And why do you need me? Right now, I don’t have any capital to invest. Moreover, once this seminar is over, won’t you be going home? Because that’s exactly what I am planning to do in two weeks from now—I’ll get back to my good old routine, to my job, and to doing very little *yoga*,’ I lied, just to see her reaction.

For once, she became serious.

‘I may, very well, do exactly the same thing you are planning to do. Go back home, continue with that ordinary life, and keep those around me happy. Or, perhaps, I could gain the courage to finally pursue something new.’

I felt caught between confusion and an urge to bear out her statement. She immediately picked up on my hesitation.

‘I do not need money,’ she said. ‘I mean, I *do* need money, but what I really wanted to say is, I do not necessarily need *your* money.’

I listened carefully.

‘I could also do this all by myself,’ she said. ‘But what fun would that be?’

‘I am a mathematician,’ I replied, ‘not a retailer or a businessman.’

‘All right. I am not forcing you to get into something you are not interested in.’

‘Look, I am sorry. I did not mean to disappoint you. It is just that all this...might not be for me.’

‘Sure, we are cool. No more talking about *rudraksha* beads.’

‘Why not?’ I asked, jokingly. ‘The conversation with Tej was quite interesting. Who would have imagined that a tree seed would be as expensive as a diamond?’

She did not comment. I knew she was disappointed.

‘Hey, Alexandra, I am really sorry,’ I repeated, trying to fix whatever damage I had caused with my insufficient or inadequate interest in her business plan.

‘I guess it is time for my farewell gift to you,’ she said all of a sudden, pulling a poker-face. She reached inside her bohemian shoulder bag and produces something that looked like a wooden necklace. She put it around my neck, before I got a chance to either look at it closely, or object.

It was a string of hazelnuts. A joke she couldn’t resist, she said. ‘Eat them before anyone sees them,’ she warned me. ‘We do not want to offend anyone. These won’t make you rich or enlightened, but they are definitely good for your health.’

I had already begun to doubt if anything at all could take me a step closer to enlightenment. Rejuvenated? Maybe. Relaxed a bit? Certainly. But anything more than that remained elusive. I neither loved nor hated my body, but this focus on the physical wellbeing seemed too materialistic to me, in spite of being told how important a healthy spine and effortless *yogic* posture were, for maintaining a proper energy flow.

Slowly but surely, I was falling out of sync with this spiritual machinery.



At night, once I closed my eyes, I had faint visions of Mia clad in wide, black robes of an Orthodox nun, walking away from me and towards some cold and misty faraway horizon. She had light, weightless and levitation-like steps. She walked without touching the ground. She wouldn't let me see her face, and no matter how fast I ran, I always stood behind her. I would then literally shake my head, as if the physical act could also shake off those troubled thoughts from my mind.

Mia loved philosophy. She often challenged me and contradicted my views. But she never ignored me, nor excluded me from her ravishing world in which nothing ever seemed to repeat. I do not know why she became so restless to abandon that life—a molting hermit crab trying to drop an outgrown shell. And what for? For a life of an eremite, for vows of poverty, chastity, obedience and stability?

To see her walk away for good, even in a dream, ached me.

And then I would think of Alexandra and of her effortless way of making people around her relaxed. I'd ask myself why life had to be so complicated, and why did I have to go through a beautiful but painful relationship with a woman who had made love turn so tiring. Life could have been a laughter, a carefree adventure, instead of a serious, philosophical and grim affair.

It no longer mattered that I had once fallen in love with Mia exactly for that penetrative, erudite mind of hers. At the same time, the fact that I knew nothing about Alexandra mattered even less. She could have scarred any man's life just like Mia had damaged mine. But it felt good to be around someone who always smiled, who was so full of energy and plans for the future, and who did not perceive life as an anthill but as

a crossroad of infinite possibilities. Alexandra was young—her mind more than her body—and that youthfulness infected me.

Throughout the following day, Alexandra remained conspicuously silent. There was something passive-aggressive in the frivolity and the nonchalance she displayed. She pretended she wasn't disappointed in my behavior from the day before; she occasionally smiled at me, but I knew she no longer saw me as worthy of her interest or time. The fallout made me feel edgy, and I could neither concentrate nor properly participate in any of the *yoga* sessions. I was angry with myself for having pushed her away by being so rigid towards her ideas. *Then again, maybe this is for the best*, I thought, given the pretense of our, nearly impossible, friendship.

Unexpectedly, it was in *Swamiji's* discourse that I found a resolution to my latest predicament. He spoke about the significance of the upcoming festival, *Shivaratri*, the night of Shiva.

'This is the ultimate night for every *yogi*,' he said. 'Your meditation during this night will be a hundred times deeper than that on any other day. Chanting your *mantra* during *Shivaratri* will be a thousand times stronger compared to that on any other day.'

Instantaneously, I recalled something Tej had said about the power of *rudraksha*. The eleven-*mukhi rudraksha* brings upon its wearer the same spiritual benefit as that of performing thousands of *yajnas* or spiritual offerings, he had said. Wearing a sixteen-*mukhi rudraksha* is as potent as chanting the *Mahamritunjaya mantra* 125,000 times a day.

I instinctively looked towards Alexandra and I caught her glance; and from the way she smiled back, I knew that the same thought had crossed her mind, too. We became temporary '*thought-twins*,' a word-coin I owe to her.

'So, not only is *rudraksha* sacred, but it also offers a head start on the path of spirituality,' I shared my insight, an hour later.

‘You call it a head start, I think of it as a shortcut,’ she replied in her signature playfulness.

In fact, for the spiritual seeker, a *rudraksha* seed represents condensed energy and time, we both agreed. It amplifies, by a factor of a hundred, or a thousand, each act of devotion. It speeds up one’s progress towards enlightenment.

‘I now understand,’ I admitted finally. ‘A *yogi* without *rudraksha* travels on foot. A *yogi* wearing *rudraksha mala* drives a Lamborghini.’

She liked my analogy. I was hoping she had accepted it as some sort of an apology.

‘Does it mean...?’

‘That I am ready to consider your proposal? By all means, yes,’ I replied.

‘Yay! By the way, do you, by any chance, have any IT background? We need an IT expert onboard!’

‘No, I told you I am a mathematician. But hey, what’s IT got to do with it?’

‘You’ll see,’ she was enigmatic. ‘First thing first: tomorrow, we will look at stones.’

‘What for?’ I asked.

‘Well, you are now convinced in the power of a single seed. But they say God is found in every star in the sky and in each stone on the ground. And just like some seeds are better than others, there are stones far more sought after, than the rest.’

.....

A broken clock, I was. The bones and the joints, all those pieces in my rusted mechanism, screeched and fought to remain rigid. I kept oiling them—lovingly, patiently, relentlessly.

And then Alexandra comes and says skipping the workshop sessions for half a day was not a big deal. I hesitated for a moment; after a week of diligent adherence to the *ashram*’s routine, my body had just begun awarding me with more elasticity and a new

elan. I knew it would be foolish to risk all that, and then have to endure the pain of readjustment, all over again.

But what choice did I have but to accept her invitation? I joined her on a half-day trip to a village located fifty miles away from the *ashram*. We took a ride on a local bus in which the temperature must have exceeded forty degrees. Still, I enjoyed the journey which, accounting for a dozen stops at various towns and villages scattered on the way, took a little bit more than two hours to complete.

I saw austerity and deprivation everywhere—in the shabby interior of our bus, in the wrinkled faces of our fellow travelers, and in the threadbare cotton *lungis*⁵³ of the shepherds I saw through the window.

Poverty was salient, but in spite of it (or, maybe, exactly because of it), my senses and my mind became sharper, and I felt much closer to life than I had been in the *ashram*. Maybe that was my nostalgia speaking, my longing for the *other* India which I had experienced twenty years earlier, India where not everything was traded in coins and prestige.

When we finally reached our destination and got down from the bus, a gust of fresh air made me feel grateful. It felt as if we were in the middle of nowhere. In front of us spread a cluster of modest-looking houses of a small, and seemingly uninteresting, nucleated village.

‘Hey, *firangi*,’ Alexandra teased me, ‘*come, drink some coconut water!*’

While I was occupied with my first impressions of the new place, Alexandra did not waste time. She had already approached a street seller of coconuts. In the shade of a splendid tree, a woman stood behind a large heap of coconuts, holding a scary-looking sickle in her hand. With a couple of quick and deft movements, she cut off the top of one of the fruits, pushed a plastic straw inside, and offered it to Alexandra. Seeing me approach, Alexandra asked the seller for one more, and before I even stepped in the shade, my refreshment was ready.

‘This is nice,’ I said, enjoying my drink. ‘Thanks.’

‘You are welcome,’ she smiled.

‘Are we stereotypical backpackers?’ I asked semi-rhetorically, since I already knew the answer.

‘Oh God, I hope not!’ she laughed at my remark.

‘When I think about it,’ I continued, ‘in the eye of a *firangi*, even modern India is a land of archetypes.’

‘I don’t think so,’ she said. ‘Not all *firangis* are alike.’

‘Perhaps not all *firangis* are totally honest about the transcendental nonsense they keep projecting onto India.’

She was taken aback by my directness.

‘Fine,’ she said after a few seconds of vacillation.

The coconut seller and her male companion were chatting in their local language. I figured out Alexandra and I had become the topic of a conversation, or the butt of a joke. It could be that they even thought she and I were fighting. Once in a while, the locals threw a friendly look at us and then giggled. Eventually, they got back to their own affairs.

‘Okay, carry on,’ Alexandra said. ‘I am listening.’

‘The insane traffic, the cows in the street, the meditating *yogi* in the Himalayas, the cremation ghats on the Ganges, those primordial sounds and music, the slums, severe dearth and poverty, mesmerizing women with beautiful smiles and *bindi* on their foreheads, colorful *saris* and glittering jewelry, *henna*, the incense sticks, the temples, Taj Mahal...Aren’t all these images still representative of India?’

‘I guess not to the young, modern and educated Indians, who would rather have their country seen as a nuclear and political power, a gigantic IT hub, a hotbed of innovation

and entrepreneurship, of doctors, scientists and engineers who become professors at ivy league schools or CEOs of large multinationals,' she retorted.

'I agree. I think that there is a lot of error, but a lot of beauty, too, in all the stereotypes about India, typically shared by foreigners. After all, those stereotypes sustain the unceasing curiosity for this country.'

'Maybe,' she said, with a trace of agreement and an overwhelming dose of skepticism.

'Hey, but you know what,' I said, 'all this is off the point. 'What I *really* wanted to say is that I have become aware of the most ridiculous archetype among them all!'

'And which one would that be?'

'The one about the foreign backpacker in soiled clothes, with long dreadlocks, body covered in oriental tattoos, and a guitar in his hands. Have you noticed? Wherever you go, he is always there, as if frozen in time. His father must have looked exactly the same when he visited India thirty or forty years ago,' I concluded. My coconut, too, was now empty.

'Now that you are hydrated, it is time to see the stones,' she ended the discussion about cows and dreadlocks.

She routinely adjusted her ponytail, pulled out a piece of paper from her bag, and asked the coconut seller for directions. They gestured for a while, and at last, Alexandra was confident she knew where to go.

'We are looking for Nalladurai,' she said. 'Apparently, his house is the biggest one in the village. It shouldn't be difficult to find it.'

As she later explained, Tej had provided the reference and guidance for the meeting with the most famous lapidary in the region. The reason she insisted on visiting his, and not any other artisanal workshop, surprised me.

‘Most of the jewelry workshops are located in the west of the country,’ she said. ‘Geographically, we are far from the gems hub. But you see, that’s exactly what I like about Nalladurai’s small family business.’

Before we even reached his house Nalladurai noticed us, standing on his spacious porch, and waved at us.

‘Miss Alexandra?’ he shouted from the distance, greeting us with visible excitement. ‘Come, please come. Tej called me yesterday. He said I should expect you around noon.’

Nalladurai was a strong, healthy-looking man in his late fifties or early sixties. Unlike most of the men we had met on the way, he did not wear *lungi* but a pair of western pants and a snow-white shirt. There was some sort of a softness on his face which stood in stark contrast with the nature of his work. Later that day, on our way back, Alexandra laughed at my observation. She said my statement was a typical example of an implicit bias. ‘To think that a man who cuts and polishes rough gems ought to have some of that roughness on his face as well, is mere stereotyping,’ she said. I disliked her remark, but due to my throbbing headache and the debilitating effects of the heat, I said nothing in my defense.

We were welcomed with a cup of tea and a plate of *samosas*. Our host’s wife and daughter-in-law came to meet us, dressed in simple yet elegant *saris*, and wearing strings of fragrant white flowers in their hairs. Nalladurai’s home was spacious; the interior design was minimalistic and very tasteful.

‘So, shall I take you to see the workshop,’ he invited, once we finished our snacks and tea.

‘Yes please, Mr. Nalladurai,’ replied Alexandra on our behalf. ‘I hope our visit is not disturbing you too much in your work.’

‘No, not at all. You are very welcome to visit anytime. We do not get many guests here. It is a pleasure to meet both you and Mr. Alexander.’

The workshop was an entirely separate house block, behind Nalladurai's family house. The whole area was about five hundred square feet, Nalladurai said. In it, fifteen workers, aged twenty to sixty, sat crosslegged on small mats that covered the floor. Each worked behind a motorized grinding wheel, polishing small stone slabs against the surface of the rotating wheel.

Nalladurai proudly gave us a small tour of the workshop, introducing us to the basics of lapidary work, including the essential terminology. He showed us bulks of rough stones, some of which came in small pieces and others in big blocks that were yet to be trimmed. He talked about different categories of gemstones based on Mohs hardness scale, and explained different lapidary approaches towards transparent, opaque and chatoyant stones. He showed us the difference between a cabochon and a faceted gemstone; the first one, he said, is a smoothly polished stone of a typically oval shape, while the second one possess a sparkle due to its multiple facets, which are first cut at varying angles, and then polished. He also showed us the process of drilling holes in the beads, followed by stringing and creation of beautiful beaded necklaces and bracelets. He said he stayed away from two things—computerized faceting machines which make the beads more uniform and the process much faster, and from certain gemstone enhancement techniques, such as heat treatment, that makes the stone colors look more vibrant. He said he preferred each bead and cabochon to be touched by the fingers of his artisans, and thus forever carry their signature. He claimed he took pride in being faithful to the tradition, even if it meant being slower and producing less.

He then led us toward an exit door located on the opposite side from our point of entry. I thought we were going to reach his backyard, but behind that door a sparkling little room welcomed us. No, it looked less like a room and more like Scrooge McDuck's vault (or Ali Baba's cave), for it was full of glittering stones in all shapes and sizes. Large crystal and marble bowls were on display, filled with semi-precious stones categorized by quality and type. Behind the glass shelves, hundreds of strings of gemstone beads were laid in thick, curled up bunches. The wall shelves were decorated with crystals

carved in many shapes: there were *orgone* pyramids, lucky turtles, auspicious elephants, and multi-faced deities. Two-hundred-pound-or-so chunks of purple rough crystals were placed at each corner of the room. ‘These are amethyst geodes, right?’ asked Alexandra, expecting some recognition for her knowledge. ‘Yes, Madam,’ replied Nalladurai, extending a generous smile and a charming head bobble, ‘this is amethyst druzy’. He then quickly pointed at a thin yellow strap across the bottom of the rock, and said, ‘See, there is a tiny inclusion of citrine here; it is rarely found in India. A combination of amethyst and citrine is known as ametrine.’

Alexandra looked very happy. At first, she appeared to know a lot about stones. But then she and Nalladurai engaged in some sort of a recognize-the-gemstone quiz. He would pull out a faceted beads necklace, and she would then guess the type of stone. For every correct answer, he gifted her a loose cabochon. For every incorrect one, she gave a stone back. ‘It is not totally fair,’ she pretended to be protesting the rules of the game, ‘you are an expert, and I am a beginner—so you will always win.’ Nalladurai accepted her amiable nudge, and replied with a wit: ‘Okay, Ms. Alexandra, let us make it fair. Your score can never be negative. In the worst case, you will walk out of here with no stone. Miss Alexandra, are you happy now?’ She smiled and tried to wobble her head in an Indian way, but she looked more like a broken marionette.

My head began to spin. She confused morganite for rose quartz, she thought malachite was a form of an emerald, and whenever she didn’t have a clue what type of a stone it was, she said it had to be some sort of a jasper. ‘No, Miss Alexandra,’ Nalladurai kept correcting her patiently, ‘this is not an Indian ruby. It is just pink tourmaline,’ he would say. And then, he would be quick to add, ‘Your score remains zero,’ forcing her to facepalm.

‘Perhaps these small beads make it harder for you to recognize,’ he then tried to encourage her. ‘Let us try with larger ones,’ he said, and pulled out a box of oval and rectangular cabochons cut and polished to fit a pendant, a ring, or a pair of earrings.

He is generous, I thought. He started giving her easy tasks. Who can fail to recognize the golden-brown luster of a *tiger eye*? Is it possible to miss the ocean-like *turquoise*, that darling of kings and pharaohs? Does any other rock compare to the metallic, ‘fool’s gold’ *pyrite*? Alexandra, of course, guessed them right, and earned all three of them.

‘Mr. Alexander, how about you?’ asked Nalladurai, kindly inviting me to join the game. I knew he was only being kind, so that I wouldn’t feel left out. ‘No, it is fine, Sir,’ I replied. ‘I know nothing about stones.’

One of Nalladurai’s men brought us some soda drinks in small glass bottles (it had been ages since I last drank from those!). After taking the refreshment, Alexandra announced that it was time for us to leave—our bus would be there in less than ten minutes. It was time to leave. They exchanged their contact details (Nalladurai offered his business card which featured diamond-shape clipart, while Alexandra shared only her personal email address). As a farewell gift, Nalladurai gave me a small piece of rough crystal. ‘This is cavansite in a matrix,’ he said. ‘From the mines in Pune.’

The slab had an ocean-blue, star-looking cluster in the center. The matrix, a mix of brown and grey, was sandy and also full of sparkles. I thanked Nalladurai for the thoughtful gift. He was pleased with my appreciation of the crystal, and added, ‘I hear that you are very interested in *yoga*. Keep this crystal close to you. It is very powerful. Meditate with it, and it can help you activate your higher *chakras*⁵⁴.’

On our journey back, Alexandra and I briefly exchanged our impressions. I quickly fell asleep on the bus. She was humming some tune. By the time we reached the *ashram*, it was already dark. ‘We’ll talk tomorrow,’ I said, heading towards my room. ‘And don’t try to steal my cavansite,’ I added, ‘I know you’ve been eyeing it.’

Foodies

‘So, why all that fuss over crystals?’ I asked Alexandra over breakfast, which consisted of milk, cereals, wholegrain bread with jam, and some sort of fruit salad.

‘Pretty amazing stuff, hun?’ She remained in her world of sparkling semi-precious gems and druzi crystals. I shouldn’t have been surprised, given her wrists and neck covered in so many strings of colorful beads.

‘I mean, why did we have to go to there?’ I rephrased.

‘So that you could receive your precious little piece of cavansite,’ she replied with a tone that confirmed there was a tad of jealousy over my possession of the blue stone.

I felt tired of eating tasteless food. There was this growing dissatisfaction with the stuff I had been eating for almost ten days in a row. *What you eat is what you become* was one of the guiding principles of the community. Well, maybe not expressed in those exact words, but it was just the same. *Swamiji* and his inner circle of *sannyasins*⁵⁵ kept talking about three types of food. *Sattvic*—the beneficial kind—largely consists of certain fruits, raw or boiled vegetables, fresh milk, wholewheat and legumes, all of which rejuvenate the organism and create physical, emotional and spiritual wellbeing in the *yogi*. *Rajastic* and *tamastic* food—with the latter being absolutely negative—is stimulating, spicy or too heavy, and covers items such as meat, fermented products, garlic, onion, potato, or pickles; on the one end of the spectrum, such food can lead to passion, anger, rage, and even violence; on the other, it can create lethargy and depression.

Maybe I *was* a slave to my tastebuds. All my clothes had become a size larger. I was not even sure if the *Sattvic* food I was eating was actually making me a better person.

‘Why don’t we go out for dinner tonight?’ I proposed.

‘If you are asking me on a date,’ she said, ‘I don’t think so. I already have a boyfriend.’

‘Nah,’ I replied, trying not to show my surprise and disappointment with this latest piece of information. ‘I am not really proposing a boyfriend-girlfriend kind of a date. A food date is what I have in mind.’

‘And so, you are saying, couples don’t dine out?’

‘C’mon, don’t tell me you are not tired to death of this plain food. Once in a while we deserve a decent meal, don’t we?’

‘Not everything that pleases your tongue is good for you, and not everything that is good for you, tastes well.’

‘Yes, you are right. But spare me the ancient wisdom. Tonight, I am going out to a real restaurant, with or without you. So, quickly make up your mind.’

‘Fine, let us go,’ she dropped the play.

‘Shall we then meet at, say seven? We’ll need at least half an hour to reach the city.’

‘Okay, seven will do.’

‘And by the way,’ I said, as she picked up her empty tray from the table and was about to leave, ‘I need to tell you that I wouldn’t call you out on a date. I, too, have a girlfriend.’

‘Ah, there you go,’ she retorted. ‘That cavansite will make a good gift for her.’

.....

Citrine for abundance, amethyst for clarity, rose quartz for love, aventurine for luck, selenite for cleansing, fluorite for learning, malachite for vitality, opal for creativity, smoky quartz for grounding. Alexandra was telling me there is lore behind all those stones we had seen in Malladurai’s workshop. I listened to her carefully, and concluded that there is so much hype over crystals. So many people actually *believe* in the metaphysical power of those stones to bring wellness, remove obstacles, ease life, and restore hope after a failure.

I was having my first non-*Sattvic* meal in ten days, and it felt good. I mean, really good. Our auto-rickshaw driver dropped us in front of a restaurant named '*Indian Pasteria*'. Alexandra was not impressed with the name, but the driver assured her that it was a 'very good restaurant, Ma'm, all kinds of food—Indian, Chinese, Amrikan. You will see, Ma'm, it is really good.'

My choice was *Pasta Arrabbiata* and a glass of red wine. She went for a vegetarian, extra cheese, oven-baked lasagna, and a mint-lemon soda. *When in India, you can show your appreciation for the local cuisine by trying an Indian dish*, the menu card advised. Perhaps it is not just a piece of advice, I thought, but a rather not-so-subtle suggestion. Without a blink, we discarded the fine print. When on *yoga* retreat in India, my growling stomach was saying, never miss the opportunity to indulge in Mediterranean food, for you never know if (and when) such an occasion may arise again.

'I am not yet great at identifying crystals,' Alexandra admitted, muttering in between two bites of her lasagna, 'but I am going to get better at it. My mom is a geologist. I used to hate all those minerals and rocks she always obsessed with. I could not stand the weekend visits to the museum of natural history. Perhaps it was out of stubbornness that, when I grew up, I chose to study something as different as possible from natural sciences. So I went for business and marketing. Now I see, I could have been cleverer, at least in the choice of my hobbies.'

'So, you are basically going to export *rudraksha* and crystals, right?' I tried to make sure I understood her plan.

'Yes, Sir,' she mockingly replied, referring to the way I had been addressed multiple times by the rickshaw driver, the waiter, and by none less but Nalladurai, the king of crystals.

'M'am,' I took the bait and let her enjoy the game, 'why Nalladurai? He lives and works in the middle of nowhere. I am sure there are hundreds, if not even thousands, of other

gemstone workshops and crystal suppliers, who are more accessible and easy to deal with.'

'Sustainability,' she replied.

'What's sustainability got to do with it?' I asked, not taking a moment to think and figure it out myself. 'I mean, I *do* know that conscious consumerism is all the rage nowadays. But I do not see the link.'

'You know what blood diamonds are, right?'

'Of course, who doesn't? Those are mined in war zones somewhere in Africa, and they are used to finance warlords, paramilitary groups and to fuel local conflicts, right?'

'Somewhere in Africa? Yep,' she stung, 'you've seen the movie.'

'Cmon,' I protested. 'I know more than just what's in the movies.'

'Oh really? Like what?'

'I also know about conflict minerals,' I said and threw an overbold look at her. 'Tin, tungsten, tantalum and gold, or the 3TGs. There are human rights concerns related to those as well, especially when mined in Democratic Republic of Congo,' I continued. 'Slavery, smuggling and violence are commonly associated with their mining. And their export and use are highly regulated by several governments.' I decided not to tell her how I knew those things. She may have been a daughter of a geologist, but I too had a couple of friends who worked in the regulatory department of a large electronics manufacturer.

'Well,' she admitted, 'not bad, my friend. Then you should be able to see the link.'

'The link? Talking about conflict crystals now?'

'Yes,' she said, all the while giving me a serious look.

'But we are in India, right?'

‘We are, and yet, while buying a piece of crystal jewelry, it is almost impossible to tell its origin. It can be Columbian emerald, Tanzanian tsavorite, Afghani lapis.’

‘And you want to source clean crystals, right? Then avoid buying those which typically come from conflict zones or failed states.’

‘It’s not so simple,’ she said. ‘Most crystals are just byproducts of the mining industry. For example, while mining for gold or copper, amethyst or malachite can also be unearthed. And then India, too, has a record of child and bonded labor, illegal artisanal mines with poor labor conditions, large mining operations that displace tribal communities and cause environmental degradation.’

‘So, if that’s the case,’ I proposed, ‘maybe the right solution for a lifestyle of health and sustainability is to altogether boycott the crystals industry. Stop buying crystals.’

‘Did you forget that we are not here to buy, but to sell?’

‘Yes, but then why talk about responsible sourcing at all? If so many people are determined to keep buying gemstones even if they know those might be soaked in child sweat or poor man’s blood, what is there to do?’

‘There is a growing awareness about some of these problems. And for many people, the origin of those stones matters. In the wellness movement, the idea is that crystals vibrate, carry the energy of the earth, and stimulate the body, the mind and the soul. No one wants to hold a crystal that has caused someone’s suffering or death. There are stories about cursed stones, too.

‘Years ago, hundreds of tourists who had taken pieces of rock from the famous aboriginal mountain Uluru in Australia, all of a sudden started sending those souvenirs back by post, saying they had brought nothing but bad luck.

‘India, too, has its fair share of unlucky gems. For example, an amethyst, stolen in mid-nineteenth century from an Indra temple in Kanpur and taken to England, is said to have brought to its owners a storm of ill health, mental illness, and misery.

‘And finally, millions believe in *karma*. Nobody wants, through a purchase of an inauspicious stone, to cause and sustain pain and misery to unknown people, somewhere up the unethical supply chain. I do believe that most of us *do* care.’

‘Do you?’ I asked.

‘Do I what? Do I care? Of course I do!’

‘Do you believe in the healing power of crystals, in the metaphysics of the *rudraksha* seeds, in *Swamiji*’s wisdom, in the possibility of your own enlightenment?’

‘Wow, those are too many questions to even be asked in one go,’ she laughed. ‘If you keep asking, I will never get to finish my lasagna.’

‘Do you?’ I asked one more time.

‘Does it matter?’

‘It does, if you’re planning to profit from someone’s superstition.’

‘I still don’t have a clear answer to some of these questions,’ she admitted. ‘But I am sure in one thing, though. Crystals, seeds and *yoga* do not harm anybody, at least. I think that it does not make any difference whether or not I personally believe that stones are more than just stones and trees more than just trees.’

‘Think about it. Someone believes in the power of a certain crystal and wants to own one. I am not a crystal healer. I am merely the provider. And if I am the one to procure those stones and seeds, then I should do it right. I want to make sure that my *rudraksha* is genuine and sourced from a smallholder farmer, at a fair price. I want my crystals to be authentic, sourced locally, not tainted with child labor or modern slavery, and to be mined from sites which have minimal environmental impact. That is why I want to associate myself with people like Tej and Nalladurai. They are locals, and they both operate in a responsible manner.’

‘I know it is not going to be easy. I will have to forego some business opportunities which involve types of cheap crystals and low quality beads. My customers might not be

ready to pay the sustainability premium. My business model may attract a lot of copycats. But that is all right. I, for one, will be content, knowing that I am doing the right thing. Also, I want to believe that, in time, ethical trade will become the standard.'

She is an idealist, I thought. I hoped her business acumen was strong enough to endure all the challenges her business ethics was likely to pose.

'But I need someone who knows enough about blockchain because, technically, I do not understand a thing.'

I laughed at her mention of blockchain. She did catch me off guard.

'Please continue,' I said. 'I can't say I expected this.'

'All I know is that, to develop a fully traceable and transparent supply chain, many organizations are now turning towards blockchain technology. They talk about it as being some sort of a public ledger, a reliable record of traceable transactions which cannot be altered because they are managed by clusters of computers and peer-networks. The chain of data records is thus reliable and trustworthy.

'Blockchain has become a buzzword across sectors and industries, from manufacturers of electric cars who depend on rare minerals to development agencies who struggle with corruption to global healthcare programs who fight proliferation of counterfeit medicine and spread of antibiotics-resistant malaria. They have all either started, or are planning to start, using blockchain.

'I do not know what it will take to implement blockchain in such a small enterprise like mine, but I am not too much worried about that. I guess, at this point, it could be too expensive a technology to adopt, but I am willing to give it a try. I could join a larger platform, enter in some sort of a partnership. Of course, we'll need an ethical IT "crystalist" on board.'

Wow, I thought, *she says she does not know anything about the blockchain technology, yet she speaks about it so confidently and convincingly. I guess her business school deserves a credit for that.*

Detachment

My *Rejuvenation Program* was entering its third week. I was practicing *yoga* regularly. I even received a *darshan* from *Swamiji*—he was smiling at me, without saying a word, like a father smiles at a newly born son. A few times, before and after this intimate moment, a peculiar thought crossed my mind—what if this holy man *really* had the gift of reading one’s mind? Wouldn’t he detest my shallowness? Maybe he is least bothered with the petty drives of a weak man. Maybe he has worries of his own—with all the scientific progress in the areas of neural networks, nanotechnology and bioengineering, anyone with just a bit of political, financial or research power and in possession of smart, Internet of Things technology, will soon be able to perform telepathic stunts on subjects, with or without their consent. In that kind of future, will mystics become redundant? Does *Swamiji*, too, fear he might soon become outsourced and obsolete? Millions of seekers will lose one of spirituality’s sweetest baits—a miracle performed by a Master. What would Vuk think of all this?

But what if the future role of the Master is far more interesting, even subversive? What if, in a society so spellbound by the marvels of the technology, the *guru* actually starts teaching a different type of skills—for example, how to stay off the grid, or how to, while wired to some giant hive mind, keep your own mind detached, impenetrable, and non-participatory? Rather than using telepathy to connect to others, the new mystic would use the power of his will to be left alone.

.....

Swamiji said we must become aware of our mortality. *In that awareness*, he said, *lies the formula for transformation*. Only the one who knows that death is imminent can develop *vairagiya*, a conscious detachment from the world of material trifles. That *vairagiya*, in turn, enables the *yogi* to become centered in spiritual practice.

One day I plucked up the courage and submitted my question to *Swamiji*. *Why should one be reminded of death, I challenged, instead of being encouraged to remember and celebrate life? Isn't the purpose of yoga to become healthier, happier, and more content?*

A day later, during the evening *satsang*, *Swamiji* picked up my letter from the pile of notes placed at his feet. He read it out loud, and said it was a good question. He was willing to respond to an anonymous seeker hidden in a crowd of five hundred meditators.

‘You are right,’ he said, ‘that’s the purpose of *yoga*, if you want to remain at the surface. *Asanas* will fix your back problems and improve your posture. They will also regulate your blood pressure, increase your metabolism, and establish hormonal balance. They will cleanse your lungs and teach you to breathe properly. You will be slimmer and radiant, your skin will have a certain glow. You’ll find it easier to concentrate and you’ll develop better sleep. Your food will nurture you, instead of slowly destroying you. Your meditation will reduce stress and provide deep relaxation. All this, and much more, can be achieved through *yoga*.

‘But that doesn’t mean that all problems will simply vanish from your life. It only means that you will be better equipped to deal with those problems. Struggles will still be there, pain too, and once in a while, you will be confronted with a death of someone whom you know.

‘The *yogi* does not run away from this truth about life. He learns to discern between *that* which is essential, and everything else which is transient.

‘And the transient is always a pile of garbage. Not a pile—it’s rather a mountain. All that trash that you keep collecting, can be taken away in an instant. Now, so many people are not capable to see that all their valuable possessions are, in fact, nothing but a heap of trash. The ability to see and finally understand, is called *vairagiya*, detachment. It does not mean being indifferent to life—on the contrary, *vairagiya* is the deepest

appreciation of life, it is the ultimate respect towards life, free from all that is wearing you out and dragging you down.

‘In moments of happiness, most people lose their awareness. They become unconscious, euphoric. That is the trouble with your proposed formula of remembering life—it is simply too difficult. It is easier to complain about things you don’t have, rather than to enjoy everything that life has already given to you. How, then, can you “remember and celebrate life?”

‘Death always shakes you up. It saddens you, terrifies you. It is said that, when witnessing someone’s burial or cremation, even the most earthly person starts to think about the meaning of life. But as soon as the funeral is over, and a day or two pass, life as usual continues. This is known as *śmaśāna-vairāgya*, the temporary detachment at the cemetery grounds. You see, even this experience of seeing another person’s death is not enough for you to become fully aware of our own mortality, and to start working on our own spiritual transformation.’

Swamiji then briefly described certain extreme spiritual practices of the *Aghori*⁵⁶ *sadhus* who can be seen around charnel and cremation places in India. To the outsider, their lifestyle of living among corpses, meditating at cemetery grounds, and even drinking water from a skull, looks sickening and mad. But their *shava sādhanā*, their meditation on the corpse, leads to an absolute awareness and acceptance of death and, ultimately, to an understanding of the very nature of life.

Swamiji warned that those techniques are, understandably, too radical for the uninitiated aspirant, and he advised not to experiment out of sheer curiosity. ‘For most people, he said, ‘such exercises are not needed. Just try to remain aware.’

○ *Kamadeva*

*But as a blade of grass held awkwardly
May cut your hand,
So renunciation may lead you into the dark.
~Dhammapada*

And so in India I almost fell in love, for the third time in my life. *Swamiji's* latest focus on discussions about death and mortality triggered some sort of an inner rebellion. *Eros* to *Thanatos*, *Kamadeva* to *Yamarāja*⁵⁷, Alexandra to who knows what, or to who knows whom. So very little I knew about her. We were born on the same *Old Continent* and had nothing else in common. She came to new India, an extrovert flirting with the future. I returned to old India, trying to dig deeper into my musty old self, and make sense of my past in order to be able to look towards some future.

It was *Shivaratri*, the *Night of Shiva*. A large portable stage was set outdoors, for the night of chanting, worship, music and meditation. A large statue of *Shiva Nataraja* was also placed on the stage—a representation of *Shiva's* great cosmic dance through which he destroys not only illusion, impurity and ignorance, but also an entire aged world, to create a new one. I thought that, being a passionate dancer herself, Mia might have liked the idea of *Tandava*, the fierce and dramatic whirl of the Indian Lord of Dance. Much like him she, too, obliterated our small world.

On *Shivaratri* the *ashram* opened its doors to everyone. Many locals and one-day visitors flocked to the Centre to participate in the celebrations. At seven in the evening Alexandra dropped by my hut to pick me up. We knew that it would be impossible to find each other amongst so many people; so we had agreed to reach the central stage

together. There would be no sleeping at all—*Shivaratri* is a night of awareness and vigil, and for a newbie meditator like me, to be able to stay awake whole night, having a companion was a necessary condition.

The date of *Shivaratri* is determined by a lunisolar calendar, and so not every year the festival falls on the same day. This time, the festival coincided with Alexandra's birthday. She was exalted and almost euphoric. She said she believed this coincidence was a subtle sign, a good omen and a confirmation from the universe that she was on the right path.

As she spoke, I just leaned forward and kissed her lips. I had never before kissed someone in such a way—like a foolish adolescent, an infatuated lover-from-a-far, presumptuously spontaneous. She tasted like wild berries from a distant land, freshly new, different, and unconfined. I held her head, fingers hasped in her long hair, and all I could think of, was how good it felt to be lost again.

She suddenly pushed me away. 'Why,' she asked. 'Why did you have to do that? Did not I tell you I am already in a relationship with another man? What gave you the right to kiss me?'

My *Shivaratri* became a dark night, a meditation spent in solitude even though I was surrounded by thousands. All I had was that piece of ocean-blue stone, the cavansite crystal which I had intended to be my birthday gift to her. Sooner or later, I thought, she may decide to share this incident with her circle of like-minded people, or maybe even with the whole world, tagging my name as one more sickening *#MeToo* perpetrator.

.....

I figured that my *Rejuvenation Program* had somehow turned into a sort of an intellect-free recess. And now, Alexandra's rejection must have caused a return to my old self. *An empty mind—a devil's workshop*, people often say in India.

Swamiji, too, quoted the proverb and offered a *mantra*, to keep the mind busy and turn the soul away from the problems of the mundane. I was not initiated, and thus I had not

received a *guru mantra* from him. Yet anyone can use a *bija mantra*, Swamiji said. That is a monosyllable, seed *mantra*, such as *aum* (or *om*), a potent sound for transformation. From the very beginning my mind fought those sounds. I should have understood, much sooner, that *yoga* was not my path.

It was during the *Night of Shiva*, in that aloneness, that my eyes remained glued on the statue, on *prabha mandala*, the *Circle of Fire* which surrounds *Shiva Nataraja* in his cosmic dance of destruction and creation. I pondered upon the meaning of that circle—an image of the universe, a symbol of destruction which is necessary for a cyclic renewal, the brightest light of cosmic consciousness.

But a man cannot square a circle, can he? He cannot comprehend the mysteries of life and death, of love and denial, of joy and sorrow. The gods can keep indulging in their cosmic games of creation and destruction; they can keep on spreading wide their nets of deception and illusion; and they can carry on constructing the man's reality with bricks made of duality.

A man cannot square a circle, unless he acquires the tools of infinity. And all his spiritual pursuits are nothing but efforts to comprehend that infinity. In finitely many geometric steps, a mathematician cannot construct a square of an area exactly equal to that of a given circle. The reason is simple. It is in the value of π , in that decimal number of infinitely many digits that disobey any pattern and carry on to infinity.

It takes a diamond to cut a diamond, and an infinity to deal with another infinity. And so, if infinitely many steps were allowed, a line segment of length π would easily be constructed, and then all the circles of this world would be squared at once.

Do you really want to know how? Sure, then please go through the following endnote⁵⁸. That is how it is done in the scientific circles. The readers are expected to square the circle of the so-called general knowledge; they are supposed to *know the fundamentals*.

But wait, this is a novel, you must be thinking, not a research paper published in some scientific journal. Of course you are right. But unless you delve into this micro-

experience which I propose, then how can you really claim you have attempted to *know* me? You see, it is not that I have suddenly become a less generous teacher (the endnote is actually much more detailed than any science editor would ever allow it to be). I squeeze these math fundamentals into endnotes, so that they would not obscure the *main* story. That, and a tad of academic arrogance, of course.

.....

Perhaps that was my first mathemato-spiritual contemplation since my arrival in India.

Alexandra was no longer comfortable around me. She was avoiding me in a graceful way, trying to keep her withdrawal not too obvious. But her smile changed into something that resembled courtesy rather than openness. Her way of talking became measured instead of frisky. And I, too, felt a mix of anxiety and ambivalence, every time I saw her or thought about our days before the kiss. I still felt attracted to her, but I began wondering if maybe she was right about us. It was never really my intention to compare her to either Sybil or Mia; yet I couldn't help but evoke memories of my younger self.

The day I told Sybil that I loved her, I knew that my confession was not a matter of choice, but of an absolute necessity. Sybil was not just a whim or a desire, she was my *desideratum*. When I think of it now, my infatuation at the age of fourteen does look a bit like a puppy love; but, even now, my body still remembers the riot of sensations it felt, the first time I held her in my arms.

When I first met Mia, I was a mature man. I had been alone for several years, comfortable with my independence and quite happily absorbed by my work. I was not the kind of man who falls in love every now and then. But with Mia, It was love at first sight. One of my colleagues, an entomologist from the Department of Biology, had asked me to accompany him for an opening of an exhibition at the Museum of Natural History. It was there, that I first saw her. She was the granddaughter of the man who had donated to the museum his personal collection of two thousand rare moths and

exotic butterflies. I never took a look at a single insect from that grandiose collection. My eyes were fixated on the scientist's granddaughter. I thought she was ravishing; everything about her was powerful, magnetic, almost out of this world. I knew at once that I had to find out everything about her. Overnight, she turned me extrovert. She made living without her impossible.

Alexandra was something else. I obviously liked her; I enjoyed her youthful energy, enthusiasm and spirit. I thought she was an attractive woman. Intelligent, too. But too safe. She did say she had a boyfriend, yet he stood nowhere in her business plan. It was hard to tell what was really there behind her carefree, New Agey brio. Maybe her bounciness, that contagious youthfulness of hers, was altogether biopic and narcissistic.

Moreover, her rejection did not hurt me the way it probably should have. It certainly bruised my ego, but it didn't shatter anything. I took that as an indicator of the shallowness and transiency of my emotions for her.

Maybe she was more than just a namesake. Maybe she was a full stop on my love *continuum*. Maybe she was the last mirror India put in front of me, before I was finally ready to change my name and begin to change my face.

Three days later, I received a private message from *Liam_1982*.

~~~

*Hey buddy,*

*Look, I am sorry, but I cannot address you by your avatar name. Not when I am writing something this personal. And I cannot guess what your real name is.*

*You never really told us where exactly you were headed to. Where are you at the moment? Thailand? India? Laos? Vietnam? Or maybe in Burma?*

*I am not even sure if what I am about to ask from you is right. At first, I was only restless, but now I am desperate, and there is only so much I can do. I need your help.*

*It has been two months now, and there is no news from Sofia. She did not write. She did not call. Her silence has been eating me up. I have the address of the monastery in Burma where she planned to join, but there is no contact number, so there is no one I could call to inquire about her.*

*In case you are in or around Burma, could you do me a favor and check her out for me, please? I just need to know that she is well. I have this weird feeling which I can't explain. And it's difficult to ignore it.*

*The monastery/nunnery is in Mandalay. If you say yes to this, I'll send you the details. If you say it is too much to ask, I will understand. I will then probably have to get a visa, take an overseas flight, and search for her myself.*

*Thanks for reading this without judging.*

*Best,*

*Liam*

~~~

Having established that neither yoga nor crystals worked for me, I realized it was time to move. Perhaps the *ashram* had kept its promise to rejuvenate my body and freshen up my mind; in certain ways, I felt better and stronger. Yet, what a strange experience this new India turned out to be!

I couldn't stay indifferent to Liam's email. It made me realize that, before his request, no-one had ever asked me for help. I didn't properly think through the consequences of my potential involvement. But it took me just a day to say yes. Burma, the once distant land, suddenly became my next destination.

I promised to become a shadow of another woman, of Liam's Sofia. What on earth did I hope to achieve? Did I honestly think life worked that way—that we could fix loose threads on each other's shirts without ever exchanging our clothes, and without knowing what those snags felt like from the inside?

PART $2^0 + 2^1$: BURMA

၀၀၀၀ *Demerit*

The heat was pitiless. It made the stray dogs go mad and chase their own tails in frantic restlessness. The hibiscus flowers willed against their natural cycle of a one-day blossom and remained open for another day. They refused to close even throughout the night, maybe out of fear that a dream would trick them into forgetting what they had been up to. Myriad tiny insects turned the night horizon into an air show, each finding refuge in the strength of the group.

A baby snake coiled, as if searching for its inner center. Suddenly, its head straightened up, towards the sky painted in the shades of a ripe betel nut. The golden bells trembled, touched by the gentle evening wind. The sacred *htis*⁵⁹ glittered, bathing in the last rays of the descending sun.

A million faces of Buddha smiled at the night's futile attempt to lull *The Awakened One* into an ocean of dreams.

'Oh my Buddha,' a teenage boy exclaimed, checking his watch. It was getting late, and his day turned out to be less than gainful. He quickly folded, like pleats of an accordion, the strings of postcards slotted behind transparent foils. The photos depicting bullock carts in misty rice paddy-fields, shimmering *pagodas* and blissfully cheerful Buddhist novices clad in monk robes, will be spread out tomorrow again.

I wasn't sure about the richness of my day. It was to be my last night at the monastery. The next morning, Bhikkhu Mamaka would take me on a spiritual rove, to help me get the better of my depression.

.....

I arrived a day too late to see Sofia's last frontier. The tall and pale foreign *thilashin*⁶⁰, they told me, was a graceful teacher at the monastic school, and a much liked modest and pious member of the monastic sorority. She taught conversational English to a class of thirty children in the age group of seven to ten. The kids loved her, and they quickly picked up new words and phrases in the language of the big world they all dreamt to see one day.

Sofia could have chosen to join a meditation program at one of the international monastic centers across the country, practice *Vipassana*⁶¹ in the manner adjusted to the age of modernity, and be able to share her path with many others who flock to the East in search of the miraculous. But she didn't. Instead, she blended into a local community, determined to spend half of each day in silent meditation at the nunnery, and the other half in the classroom, supporting children whose parents had either passed away or were too poor to afford a state school.

Based on this, I refuse to discard Sofia as some kind of a modern-day missionary; to be one, she would have had to work for her own system of beliefs, or at least promote some western-style, 'modern' education. Sofia's choice was quite the opposite; she opened herself up to a different world, in hope to find some meaning in it, or answers to certain questions that her old world could no longer provide. For Sofia, teaching must have been just a way to give something in return.

I, too, was supposed to adjust to a similar lifestyle (even if only superficially). At least that was the plan. Mirroring Sofia's choices was the most straightforward way to be in her vicinity. I was ready to teach and spend most of my time around *pongyis*⁶². I do admit, however, that I lacked the courage to become one. There was no reluctance to shave my head or accept those, *who-knows-how-to-wear* robes of a monk, for I never really held on to my looks. The reason I could not go through the plan was some sort of an uneasiness—perhaps a totally irrational one—that others would immediately *know*, that they would easily *see* through me, and that they would then look at the fraud with utmost disdain. In the words of Bhikkhu Mamaka, such an act would have been

*akútho*⁶³, morally malefic and wrong, and as such it would have burdened my soul with grave demerit.

.....

Based on Liam's information, I located a suitable boarding monastic school for boys on Sagaing Hill. Managed by one of the oldest monasteries in the country, the school was located about half a kilometer from Sofia's nunnery. The area, I found out, was the physical locus of the monastic community, with the highest concentration of monks and nuns in the country.

It wasn't difficult to find an online agency specialized in placing volunteers eager to teach at remote schools around the developing world. I ticked the '*English*' and '*Mathematics*' boxes in the application form (luckily, TESOL certificate was not required for teaching in the country of my choice), and in the '*Comments*' section I stated the name and the address of the monastery I wished to join. An agent contacted me shortly, to advise me not to select a particular location. He said Burma was a land of more than a thousand monastic schools, and that my insistence on teaching at a particular one would not only make my placement harder, but also deprive me of the opportunity to see, in his words, some other, potentially more interesting parts of the country. He wasn't able to understand my adamance, and I couldn't share my reasons. Eventually, by doubling my fees, he sent the acceptance letter and the documents required for a visa. I was to teach math at a primary school level.

It was all done in less than a week. After being a quasi-yogi for almost a month, a time come (and a reason, too) to turn towards the land of *Buddha*.

.....

What I am writing is not a travelogue, but a diary of the outcomes of my recent choices which now seem so unhitched from my once solid sense of reasoning, that I am bound to question my sobriety. It thus makes little—if at all—sense to describe in great detail

the peculiar kind of beauty which I found in this new land—an esthetics, I should rather say, which distracted me from what was supposed to be my primary focus.

I will only say that attuning to Burma was pretty much an effortless acquisition of a taste for a thing untried. I let my mind drift into the tranquil scenery of the streets intercepted by maroon-colored streamlets of monks, whose eyes seemed detached from the world, and arms firmly wrapped around begging bowls. The dry soil promised to granulate into the finest specks of dust, triggering allergies I wasn't even aware I was prone to; yet even that dust somehow whispered to me. My feet hurt from the mid-day barefoot walks around gargantuan *pagodas*. I let the local food gauge the stretchability of my taste buds. I drank from wayside water-jars placed on roofed wooden racks and set under random trees, abandoning the advice to stick to bottled water. Humbling and undeserved, smiles from random strangers came in plentitude. Before I even knew, this place removed layers of quasi-protection I had been hiding behind. I suddenly awoke feeling bare, as if this northern-man's shelter, made of icicles of sarcasm, got leveled to the ground.

How long did it take for the change to happen? Perhaps longer than I am now ready to confess. Yet one thing is sure—without Bhikkhu Mamaka's painful prodding, my once sour and resentful core would have never allowed for anything good to happen.

.....

My first week at the *kyaung*⁶⁴ was rather informal. I was not expected to fully engage yet, neither in the classroom nor in any other supplementary activity at the premises. However, not knowing how else to spend my time, I began to work from day one. I taught basic arithmetic skills for two hours daily, in the class period right after the lunch break.

My youngest student was Arkar, a six-year-old boy. He had left his native village a year earlier, following the death of his mother, a single guardian and the only family Arkar

ever had. He got accepted on a recommendation from a senior monk from the village. For the little boy, the monastery was now a new home.

Arkar was such a whirligig, a frisky little boy with a winsome smile and genuine inclination to learning. He could say quite a many words and sentences in English, thanks to the zest of a young monk who had been teaching him along with other boys outside the regular class time. While the children did their daily chores, such as cleaning the dishes or sweeping the floor, the monk engaged them in rote learning. It was an exercise in choral repetition—the boys would loudly repeat simple words in English. I witnessed the effectiveness of the method as the students, although still very young, communicated sufficiently well. When little Arkar called my name, it sounded like ‘Teacha Alexandra’, due to his cute tendency to pronounce words ending in the letter ‘r’—such as *sugar* or *water* or *father*—in a non-rhotic style.

I expected the monastery to be a place of saturnine recluses of such outfit and mien that the last trace of one’s individuality is rubbed out. But those I lived among were neither emaciated nor subservient. Their eyes were not stony, but affectionate. Inside the meditation hall, their bent knees and strained minds suffered no pain like mine. Outside that hall, their chiming laughter and boyish playfulness put my doddering soul to shame. I realized that my own life—not theirs—had always been dour and staid, and my ideas about spirituality—so ridiculously lopsided.

‘You cling to your taste buds, teacher!’ A monk laughed at me during lunch. He had seen me push the pieces of durian fruit to the corner of my plate. ‘A food is a food, and everything ends into the same pot,’ he added, tapping his stomach for a dramatic effect.

Once, when I slid on the floor covered in soapy residue from the pots that had just been washed, another monk ran towards me, just in time to hold my arm and help me stay on my feet. ‘My brother,’ he said, ‘you were not mindful. Your walk and your awareness should be one. Once you start walking that way, you will never fall.’

The monks advised me not to rush; they said I should be mindful and take the time to adjust to the new place, to the air, and to the local weather. I was accommodated on the second floor of the monastery, where I shared a small room with another teacher-volunteer, Stefan. Probably in his early twenties, Stefan was a student of Asian Cultures, on a study-abroad gap semester. Apart from the basic courtesies which we routinely exchanged, our interaction was quite limited. We discussed strategies for mosquito control, exchanged medicine (he had frequent spells of bad stomach), and agreed on the time of the night when the lights in the room would go off.

We were afraid, at first, of the prospects of oversleeping in the morning. Although neither of us was a monk, we wanted to follow the routine of our hosts, and that included waking up at 4:30. It barely took us a day or two to realize that no alarm was necessary; the monastic gong was such a nuisance that, no matter how tired or sleep-deprived one might be, his sleep could not remain undisturbed.

‘Actually, it isn’t a gong,’ Stefan explained to me, with a brio that reeked of bookish arrogance. ‘It is called a *kadalet*, and this particular one is an extraordinary piece, perhaps over a hundred years old. It is basically a hollowed-out log, unlike the metal gongs which can be seen everywhere. Ours must be worth a fortune. The monks told me that, already twice, the *kadalet* was nearly stolen.’

For the rest of the morning I was haunted by a ludicrous visualization. My mind pictured a scenario in which three or four delinquents try to rob the monastery. One of them bribes the pariah dogs using a piece of meat laced with poppy seeds, and so the dogs quickly fall into a blissful drowsiness. Then the bad guys somehow manage to remove the heavy chains from which the *kadalet* is suspended. Then they carry the hundred-kilos-heavy object as if carrying a large coffin, or a boat. They sneak out towards an unknown location (maybe a cave) on Sagaing Hill, from where they would later (who knows how) smuggle the historical artifact across the mighty Irrawaddy River. Indeed, that visualization credibility to Stefan’s hearsay information.

In spite of Stefan's rather outgoing nature, I mostly remained reserved, thinking how little the two of us had in common. Given his age and scholarship, he should have reminded me of Vuk and of my old student days. Yet somehow, the only thing he made me aware of was the painfully obvious age gap between us.

Perhaps I was really getting old. Still, if I were to give him the benefit of the doubt, it might be a bit more accurate to say that, even under normal circumstances, two expats can rarely become 'friends'. Of course, for all practical purposes, such as sharing the costs of living, foreigners stick together. But the real 'buddy' experience seldom reaches peak. I know the most camouflaged reason for that. I am—and I always have been—an opinionated man; and thus, in my assertive opinion, the reason for this expat-to-expat animosity is what I call *the ownership of inimitable experiences*. Back home, every repatriate will have plenty to tell about the thrills of the life abroad. But right now, any fellow traveller is a witness to the nondescript details of that life in the *home away from home* (oh how I detest that phrase!), and an unpleasing reminder that those 'unique' experiences are, in fact, thoroughly replicable.

My way of following the daily schedule of the monastery was restricted to the housekeeping rules of getting up on time and going back to bed no later than others. The monks ate twice a day. Their breakfast started at 7:30, followed by their barefoot alms round, while the lunch took place at 11:30. On most days (except for the weekend) I ate together with the monks. My arithmetics class was scheduled from 1:30 to 3:30 in the afternoon, and apart from that, I had no other responsibilities. As long as I was back by seven (after taking dinner at a local eatery), no-one really cared what I did or where I went.

For almost a week, my behavior was no different than that of a tourist. I did have plenty of time on my hands, so I walked a lot, bought myself a couple of traditional *longyis*⁶⁵, tried local street food, and made donations at local *pagodas*. I made acquaintances with monks. Some of them were ordained, but many were novices initiated into a short-term

monkhood, who planned to wear the robes for just a week or a month. Most of them were eager for an opportunity to practice their English.

Apart from the desire to understand the life of a monk, my interaction was obviously driven by my personal agenda. In many monasteries, I was told, nuns were not prevented from interacting with monks. On the contrary, they ran errands, did bookkeeping, and even cooked and cleaned for them. Unfortunately, even though I saw a few pink-clad⁶⁶ nuns in the courtyard of our monastery, those occasions were too few and too rare. I had no clue how to approach them, and even if I somehow managed to strike a conversation, I wouldn't know how to ask for an information about a particular foreign nun they might have know about. I therefore thought that an indirect approach would work better. A monk friend could inquire on my behalf.

But time was not by my side. I could not afford to wait any longer. After all, I was not much of a friend-maker.

.....

On my seventh day in the monastery, and just before I officially began my full-time assignment, Bhikkhu⁶⁷ Ashin⁶⁸ Mamaka took me by the arm and led me towards the wooden bench under the old *padauk*⁶⁹ tree which prominently stood in the center of the monastery courtyard. I wondered if I would stay long enough to see it bloom—it would take at least another two months before the panicles of tiny, golden-yellow flowers awoke from their annual sleep and spread the delight I had only read about. 'Perhaps with this kind of temperatures and changing weather,' *bhikkhu* said, 'this year we can smell the flowers a bit earlier.'

Bhikkhu Mamaka was regarded as one of the most senior monks at the monastery, and one of the few who did not permanently reside there. He carried a distinct vibe of an untamed recluse. Rumor had it that Bhikkhu Mamaka had, at his own will, gone through several alternate spells of temporary monkhood, followed by disrobing and then donning the monk robe all over again, without losing any of his *pāramīs*⁷⁰ or spiritual

perfections. He sometimes went back to his native village, to support his parents during a season of poor harvest. At other times, he was resolute to live like a layman, in order to test his spiritual progress at the center of a clamorous marketplace. He took time to complete an undergraduate degree in biology. He once distanced himself from both the *Sangha*⁷¹ and his secular life; people believe that, for almost five years, he wandered the hills in search for authentic *weikzas*—saintly wizards, healers and practitioners of alchemy, capable of bridging the material and the spiritual worlds.

I looked at him thinking there was no way of assessing his true age. Bhikkhu Ashin Mamaka could have been anywhere between forty and seventy years old. Burmese monks and nuns are known for their longevity. Sometimes attributed to their dietary habits, and sometimes to their psychosomatic equilibrium, their wellbeing radiates both inwardly and outwardly.

‘Why are you really here?’ he suddenly asked. ‘I do not think teaching is something that motivates you.’

‘But I do teach, almost every day,’ I said. ‘Back home, my students are not as young, and my lessons are not as simple,’ I tried to explain. ‘But whether he works at a school or at a university, a teacher is always a teacher.’

Bhikkhu smiled.

The assurance in his smile made me trust him instantaneously. I knew that he knew I was not there for the reasons stated; yet he let it go. He showed no specific interest in, nor judgment for my mundane affairs; it was clear, though, that he did not believe a word I had said.

It has taken me some time to fully appreciate the inimitable serenity of sitting together with a monk. Once the prattle of the mind stills, and the body lets go of its pointless fidgeting, sitting silently with a *bhikkhu* feels like an invisible blooming of *padauk* flowers. It fills the inner space with a fey scent. Bhikkhu Ashin Mamaka showed me the way to such peace-filling simplicity. Perhaps those were my first meditative states in

which I experienced *metta*, the loving-kindness towards all sentient beings—myself included.

.....

When ten days later I accepted the impossibility of finding Sofia by myself, it was Bhikkhu Ashin Mamaka to whom I turned for help. I told him that a friend of mine had been trying to get in touch with a girl who had recently started a monastic life in a nearby nunnery. I said that my friend only wanted to make sure she was doing all right. I asked him if there was a way of getting to know her whereabouts. And I desperately hoped that *bhikkhu* would not conclude that Sofia was my girlfriend or wife.

Bhikkhu listened carefully, and remained silent for almost a minute after I completed my request. I began feeling uncomfortable, regretting my audacity and naive expectation that my agenda would go unnoticed.

He suddenly raised up his gaze, looked me in the eye and said, 'It is impossible.'

I was taken aback by the dour manner in which he had dismissed my plea. Before I could even utter a word, he touched my upper arm in a somewhat fatherly way, and made me take a seat. He made a particular gesture with his hand, which to my then untrained eye looked like a sign to stop talking. When I think of it now, it was probably *Abhaya*, the *mudra*⁷² of reassurance and benevolence.

'It is impossible for your friend to get a fair answer,' *bhikkhu* said. 'If we ask him what he means by "doing all right," he would most probably not know how to answer. Is *he* himself doing all right? Are *you* doing all right? Then how can you even begin to know if someone else is doing all right?'

How does one reply to such a question? For a few seconds I remained silent, staring back at him.

‘Could I at least tell him if she is still here, if she has carried through her plan of becoming a nun? Has she taken the precepts?’ I finally formulated my question in the right way.

He nodded.

The next day he brought the news. Neither Sofia nor her body were there anymore.

.....

My first day at the monastery turned out to be Sofia’s last one at the nunnery. Had I arrived even a week earlier, the outcome would have probably been the same. There is no way of finding a discrete way of getting close to a nun.

I was told that within just two months of her new life as a shaven-headed nun donned in pink *kasaya*⁷³ robes, Sofia decided to die. She took a cocktail of pills, and left behind a short, handwritten note. In it, without stating the reasons for her extreme decision, she apologized to Sayalay Theyi, the most senior *thilashin and the* abbess of the nunnery. ‘The manner in which I choose to go,’ Sofia wrote, ‘should ensure that you will not have too much trouble dealing with the physical remains.’ Before she took her own life, Sofia made a significant donation to the nunnery. Bhikkhu Mamaka said that the money she left would be enough to support the basic needs of the nunnery for at least six months.

‘We will never know what really made her take that step,’ he said. ‘Perhaps she finally understood that one cannot run away from *dukkha*⁷⁴ in this life. The human life, as most people know it, is sorrow. Regrettably, she must have felt overwhelmed by pain. But rather than practicing the *Eightfold Path* to attain freedom from it, she chose to act in a way that does not liberate. There is no shortcut to *nibanna*⁷⁵.’

.....

For a long time after I received the news of her demise, I kept trying to imagine what meeting Sofia would have looked like. If, at sunrise, I stood at the corner of the street

across her nunnery, and waited to see the group of nuns with their begging bowls, would have I recognized her face among theirs?

While monks accept food in utmost silence, the alms rounds of nuns are very different. As they receive donations, the nuns keep chanting blessings for health, wealth and wish fulfillment for their benefactors. I wondered if Sofia, too, learnt those verses and managed to recite them in a deep, unwavering voice.

Would have those pink robes and her shaven head concealed her phenotypes, posture, and signs of a western upbringing? Maybe, I thought, a sudden tremble in her neck would have told on her uneasiness with the act of begging. Or perhaps, I imagined, I would have recognized a certain sense of disorientation in her eyes, some sort of dread, rooted in the realization that she was on the path of self-annihilation.

There were, of course, other ways of meeting her, too. Since I wasn't ordained, I could have pretended to be a tourist and then tried to take a peek inside her classroom. I would have taken a couple of photos (*'for my travel blog'*) as most tourists do, and that way be able to share them with Liam. I would have left it completely up to him to interpret Sofia's state of body, mind and soul, based on her appearances in those pics. Those photos could have helped him have a glance at her new world. It is also possible that they would have turned into a *Rorschach*⁷⁶ black stain, a pathway to another darkness.

There is no way of knowing.

And without knowing exactly how or why, Sofia's death suddenly pushed me, too, into a very dark place of my mind, to my very own *dukkha*.

ဒုတိယ *Drops of Water*

*B*hikkhu knew I was no longer in a position to teach or be around children. He said the best thing I could do to come to terms with the news would be to silently sit in meditation for at least a couple of days. It was up to me to decide what I wanted to do afterwards. I could stay and teach, or I could travel back home.

I spent the next three days barely speaking. I realized that I had somehow stopped thinking about Mia. I knew her Christian nunnery was of a totally different kind, but inside my head her image now fused with the images of Sofia and Alexandra. The three of them suddenly shared the same reality, became a part of the same world, and the implications of that were frightening.

There were a few computers, but no Internet connection at the monastery. Even though I was going through a digital detox, I suffered no symptoms of deprivation. But it was time to honor the promise I had made to Liam.

I took a ride on one of those crazy pick-up trucks, the only available public transport in my locality. A ten-minute-downhill-ride later, I reached the market, entered a café, and connected my phone to the wi-fi network. There was no message from Liam. I asked myself whether I should fret the meaning of his silence. So I closed my eyes and sat quietly for a few minutes, face buried in hands, until some sort of acceptance filled my chest.

I pulled myself together and began to type. I hoped my email would not be a bearer of tragic news, but merely a regretful conveyor of genuine condolences. I kept telling myself that someone must have already reached out to Liam. He must have received the news, either directly from the Embassy, or through Sofia's family. I kept the wording of my email simple, and expressed my regret for having failed to prevent the tragedy. I wondered if Liam would be able to sense, hidden between those lines, my own dreadful

apprehension. *Maybe this was not a good idea*, read the last line of my email. *We tried to help one another, only to end up witnessing each other's sorrow*. It took me an hour of writing and rewriting before I could summon the courage to let the email leave my outbox.

.....

My roommate Stefan must have noticed the sudden change in me, but chose not to ask any questions. Apart from sleeping, I barely spent any time in the room. I don't think I talked to anybody, yet I vaguely remember a pair of small hands around my neck and Arkar's sweet voice asking, 'Teacha Alexanda, why not happy?'

That little boy suddenly felt like the only family I was left with. Another monk once told me that the bond I shared with Arkar must have been deeper than a teacher-student relationship. '*Yezet*⁷⁷,' he said, 'it has to be that.'

He explained to me that when two people form a close bond so naturally and effortlessly, they must have known each other in their previous lives. They have earned merit by participating in the same ritual of donation at a *pagoda*, and today they owe their meeting to those water droplets sprinkled onto the image of *Buddha*.

What a beautiful saying, for a beautiful mystery of belonging together! I finally got a word for the feeling I could never describe. *Soulmates*, that sugary expression with strong romantic connotation, never seemed to be doing justice to the extraordinary experience of being drawn to somebody.

I must have been a scrooge in my previous life, I thought. Whatever little good I had done, whatever little merit I had earned, is now over. I have ever really liked only three people—Sybil, Vuk, Mia. All of them now gone from my life. All *yezets* is exhausted, all drops of water evaporated, all merit encashed.

I feared I would sprinkle some of my present sorrow onto the soul of that innocent child. Therefore, I believed it would be best to stay away from Arkar. I mostly sat alone in one of the meditation rooms in the monastery. I am not sure if what I was doing

could fit any definition of a meditation; still, a lot of introspection was contained in those long hours of silence and solitude.

Strangely, I felt the hall was most peaceful during the early mornings and evenings, when everyone was present. I used to close my eyes and listen to the prayers and chants in the ancient language I understood none of. That sound filled my chest with some unknown tranquility.

A young monk once shared a Buddhist story about a cauldron of bats that hanged upside-down from the ceiling of a cave in which a Buddhist recluse meditated. Just by listening to the *Dhamma*⁷⁸ scriptures recited by the monk, the bats gained merit and, after being reborn as humans, joined the *Sangha*. In this new incarnation, their souls easily resonated with Buddha's words, and ultimately attained *nibanna*.

I did not feel I was gaining any merit by attending the *karuna bhavana*⁷⁹ meditation of those who sincerely sought refuge in the *Triple Gem*⁸⁰. I did not deserve anyone's compassion. I was just selfishly clinging to those moments of peace I felt during the meditation—tiny pockets of relief in the fabric of my *kamma*⁸¹.

Ultimately, I came to the conclusion that I was suffering from depression. Most likely, it was not of the transient kind. The feeling was debilitating. I neither had a reason to stay at the *kyaung* anymore, nor a desire (or purpose) to go back home.

.....

Mandalay was less than an hour-long drive away from the *kyaung*. One afternoon I went to see the Royal Merit Pagoda, situated at the foot of Mandalay Hill, and famed as *the largest book in the world*. The 'book' is, in fact, a cluster of 729 small and snow-white, cave-like *stupas*⁸², each containing a large marble stone, engraved with Buddhist texts. I thought a short trip away from the monastery would do me some good.

I was standing in front of a *kyauksa gu*⁸³, looking at the slab covered in beautifully engraved strings of text. The language was *Pāli*—that of Gautama Buddha, and the script Burmese—that of the people who love *The Awakened One* like no other.

‘My friend,’ I heard someone standing behind me. I turned around and saw a monk greet me with the widest possible smile, as if he had just recognized a long-lost mate.

I smiled back with confidence far inferior to his, and then quickly stepped back, thinking that maybe he was impatient to see the very same slab I had been standing in front of. It turned out that the monk was just eager to engage in a conversation.

‘Where are you from?’ he asked.

‘Europe,’ I vaguely replied.

‘Ah, Europe,’ he sounded satisfied, as if he knew all about the continent and even more about me. I was nevertheless glad he did not examine me with an interest any more specific.

‘Are you from Mandalay?’ I asked, trying to reciprocate his friendliness.

‘No,’ he said. ‘I live in a monastery in Mandalay, but I was born in a village in Magway. My mother still lives there.’

I nodded, trying to determine his age. As with most people in Burma, that was never an easy thing. Apart from the very old, all others appeared to me much younger than what their birth certificates would otherwise reveal.

‘I come here every day,’ he continued. ‘I study the scriptures. You know, this is the book of the Buddhists. All Buddha teachings are written here. First I study *Pāli*. I hear, I write, I understand. Then I come here. I read, and read, and read. I memorize. 729 stones. Approximately eighty lines on each side of the stone. So much to learn. So much to understand. For twenty years I come here every day.’

His story seemed unbelievable. He must have seen the mistrust on my face, for he asserted again that enormously bright smile, and then invited me to follow him.

He brought me in front of another *stupa*. Its enshrined dark marble slab was covered in letters gilded with gold.

‘Look,’ he said. ‘Earlier, all the words were covered in gold. British soldiers took it away. They also took diamonds, emeralds, and rubies from the top.’ In his limited, but good enough English, he was telling me the story of the desecration, committed by the Royal British troops at the end of the nineteenth century, when everything valuable was taken away—from the brass bells to the most precious of the gems that once adorned the spires to the gold ink from the marble slabs. The Royal Army committed the greatest royal demerit ever conceivable.

‘But they did not take with them the real gold,’ the monk continued. ‘Buddha’s words, Buddha’s teaching. That is most precious. Bigger than the gold and all the gems. I will die, you will die, what can we take with us? Buddha’s truth never dies.’

Suddenly, twenty years did not seem that long at all. The man in front of me had the zest that could last a hundred lives. He was reading one beautiful and large book which, he believed, contained everything about life that was worth understanding.

‘I must go now,’ said the monk abruptly. And he suddenly walked away, without even saying goodbye.

I, on the other hand, stood there much longer. I could not make myself leave. I stared at the stela, observing those perfectly straight and fine-carved lines of the sacred text written in the language I did not understand. Yet the mere act of watching had such a soothing effect on me, as if I were admiring a remarkable piece of art.

Just like the other-race bias makes us poor at telling apart faces of people outside our own group, so did all Burmese letters look alike to me. I thought I would never be able to differentiate them, even if my life depended on it.

And just like exposure makes us better at dealing with the former, so did my prolonged observation of the marble slab sharpen what used to be fuzzy and blurred.

The moment I recognized ∞ , the lemniscate, that mathematical symbol for infinity embedded again and again in those writings, I became almost euphoric. I came even closer to the marble stone, examining with utmost attention what earlier looked like

long, unterminated strings of round, bubble-like writings. There was this one letter that looked like a perfect lemniscate, a completely closed loop of a flipped eight. Then, there was another one (∞), which looked almost the same, except for its right-side loop that remained open at the base. And a similar one, whose curve refused to cross its center twice (∞). Several other letters all seemed to be missing just a tiny part of the same shape—either its bottom (∞), or its top (∞), or some random piece (∞ and ∞ and ∞).

There was even an infinity placed in a square (∞)! Several other letters looked like half-lemniscates—like the letter ‘O’—either partial or complete (∞, ∞, ∞, ∞). It could be a version of *c*, the symbol of *continuum*!

I understood, at once, the merit contained in those twenty years during which the monk kept zealously reading this astonishing book. It must be, indeed, the world’s greatest book, when even its letters, long-deprived of their golden ink and glorious *htis*, still wrap around infinity.

My Aleph Null followed me (or perhaps even led me!) to this place. Oh how astonished I was upon this realization! It shook every bit of my skeptical core, it sneered at my rational mind which had always been more at ease with a reality devoid of mystery.

It was time to get back to the *kyaung*.

.....

Three days later, my mind was clear.

I went to Bhikkhu Ashin Mamaka and, summarizing the events that had brought me to the monastery, for the first time I was completely honest with him.

He listened carefully. His face remained calm, and he appeared both unsurprised and undisturbed by my confession. He did not blink at the mention of my nearly-obsessive game of hide-and-seek with infinity which kept appearing, not only through my mathematical musings, but in other, literally tangible forms, such as a dog named Aleph Null, a mathematical-cosmogonic poem, and an Eastern alphabet.

When I finally spilt all that confession out, Bhikkhu Mamaka closed his eyes, and remained silent for several minutes. I sat there, confused and all keyed up, not sure whether or not it was appropriate to just stare and wait for him to open his eyes again. I couldn't decide if I, too, should close my eyes and try to meditate. And then, he spoke.

'All those hints, all those signs on your path, served one purpose only—to bring you to this place, to awake you to this moment. Here is the place to dismiss them. Now is the time to bid them farewell.

'You have arrived, and you must know that you are where you should be, where a true transformation can begin. No longer should you rely on symbols, signals and nudges—you have arrived. But let me tell you—it is now and here, that the real work begins.

'For a while, you may feel all alone, lost and abandoned. You'll need to make an effort. You'll need to accept the challenge. These will be pains and strains that you will have to endure. Now, forget about all that magic. Forget the mystery. Look inwards. Open up to your present.

'So, what do you say?'

'You were right, Bhikkhu Mamaka,' I said. 'I have not been doing all right. Not today, not during the past few days. In fact, I haven't been doing all right for quite some time now.'

For the first time he did not smile. Instead, there was some trenchant expression in his eyes.

'So, what do you want to do now?' he asked.

'You were right, Bhikkhu Mamaka,' I repeated. 'I am not a teacher. But *you* are. Show me the way.'

'If you want to join me,' he said, 'if you are ready to learn, then I can accept you. But there is one condition.'

‘A condition, of course,’ I said, and smiled wearily. He, of course, immediately caught my gesture, even though he would not have possibly known all the details about the conditions I had fulfilled back home, once in Theo’s animal shelter, and then again in Enoch’s cellar.

‘You can decide not to do anything that I propose to you,’ he replied. ‘No question will be asked, no excuse expected. You can carry on with your life. But if you miss this time, you will not find me again.’

‘I accept,’ I said hurriedly. ‘I do not need to think. I’ll do whatever you ask.’

‘In that case,’ he nodded, ‘half of the condition is already fulfilled. Be ready tomorrow morning at 4:00. We need to start early.’

.....

Do you know what a gold beater is? I didn’t, not until I became one.

He is a poor man. He keeps hammering a piece of gold, until it spreads wide and thin. And then he keeps hammering more. He creates layers of gold so thin, that his craftsmanship is nothing short of a miracle.

Never again will I be able to look at the shimmering golden *pagodas* of this land, without remembering, in an instant, the hands of the gold beater wrapped around the pounding hammer.

I wore nothing but cotton *longyi*, fastened around my waist in a bulky knot. With my legs placed apart, I straddled the triangular stone slab fixed on the ground, which served to support a rectangular wooden frame. Onto that frame, a pouch containing tiny pieces of gold was securely fastened with the help of a rope and several sticks. I was given a mallet weighing somewhere around three kilos.

The space was hot and damp. I was an apprentice among seven gold beaters in the workshop. They laughed when they saw me. Perhaps they thought I wouldn’t last an hour.

I hammered for six hours in order to make a gold leaf worthy of touching a Buddha. I somehow doubt that the quality of my product satisfied the sharp eye of the supervisor. I did fulfill, however, Bhikkhu Mamaka's condition.

Men and women unknown to me will purchase some of the gold leaves which I made with my two bare hands. They will peel off the gossamer foil, and guild a Buddha statue, whispering a prayer or two. There should be a word, similar to *yezet*, to describe this kind of a bond—unseen, untouched, unheard, but intrinsic—between a gold beater and a devotee.

The pouch consists of thin, waxy bamboo sheets. In-between those sheets, hundreds of thin layers of gold are placed, like dry plants laid in a herbarium. I felt amazed that, even there, in that humid room of a neighborhood frozen in time, while breathing heavily and sweating profusely, things managed to remind me of Mia and her wooden flower press.

The bamboo paper itself is a product of strenuous work. Young bamboo stems, pickled in lime for three years, are crushed and ground in a large mortar for two weeks, to produce a kind of mush that can be cast, dried and beaten, to make the sheets smooth and waxy enough to be used in the gold parchment.

Improvised water clocks made of coconut shells governed the rhythm of my work. I wasn't sure I understood the mechanism, so I just followed the movements of the other men. After hammering for half an hour, someone came and removed the pouch, in order to cut each gold layer into multiple pieces, and rearrange the stack. The pouch was then, once again beaten for another half and hour, after which new cutting and rearranging of the gold foil was done. In the final stage, which took five long hours to complete, we hammered more than ten thousand times, following the dynamics dictated by the water clock.

I suddenly felt grateful to *Swamiji*, and indebted to all those *yoga* sessions in India, for making my body slim, firm and strong enough to endure this kind of labor. I was a weakling in a room full of hardy men. Yet I did not quail in front of the task.

The thudding pattern of the hammers permeated my breathing, my heartbeat, and the rhythm of my whole body. It then steadily suffused my thoughts, my mood, the pace of my mind. At times, it felt as if my fingers would stiffen, and the heavy mallet would drop on the ground. And then again, an unusual vibrancy would suddenly lift me up, making me no longer be Alexander, but a cog in a large clock gear. I could not stop—it felt as if, every time I slowed down, the other cogs kept pushing me forward.

The whole time Bhikkhu Mamaka was sitting in a corner of the room, watching me silently. At the end of the day, he nodded. ‘It is time to sleep,’ he said. ‘You need to take rest, and be ready for work tomorrow.’

.....

In the early hours of the following day, Bhikkhu Mamaka took me to a small wooden structure in the quarters of Mahamuni Paya, the holiest of *pagodas* in the city. ‘Get your place,’ he said, making me join a row of seven women seated on the floor amidst small heaps of scented flowers.

And just like the men laughed at me the day before, so did the women, too, welcome me with giggles.

Those same hands of mine that carried a heavy mallet and pounded gold, were now assigned a different task. I had to spend an equal amount of time in stringing tiny flowers, to make garlands that would be offered at the temple.

The day before, I smelled of strain and sweat. This time I smelled of jasmine and grace.

But all my muscles and bones suffered of inflammation. I wasn’t able to pick up a flower without shaking. My fingers were uncooperative, my upper arms were weak, and my palms seemed too large to manage such a delicate task. Once again, Bhikkhu Mamaka sat in the corner of the room and watched me. He did not talk, he did not eat.

My task for the day was to produce a hundred stringed flower garlands. Each was one meter long. Funny enough, I thought it was easier to keep hammering than to weave buds into flower garlands. I was embarrassed at my display of such weakness.

But I did not stop. The tremor in my hands did not recede, but my patience grew with time. The beads of sweat on my face, especially those around my eyes, skewed my vision. Many times I pricked my fingers with the long, rusted needle; it is surprising that I caught no tetanus.

My first garland was so pitifully asymmetrical, that it immediately became an object of ridicule in the room. Bhikkhu Mamaka was the only one who did not laugh. By the time I made my tenth garland, two of the women were generously nodding and encouraging me to continue. When, after three hours, I finally finished the fiftieth one, the eldest worker approached me, exchanged it for fifty *kyats*⁸⁴, and decorated her hair with it. The last ten strings were so graceful and pretty, that even Bhikkhu Mamaka finally smiled at me.

‘You are now ready,’ he said, as the two of us walked back to the monastery. ‘Always remember this lesson. Every time you hammer gold, do it with a grace of a stringed flower maker. And every time you need to create a delicate string of flowers, do it with a commitment and determination of a gold beater.’

.....

The next day my ordaining took place. I could not understand why they called it an ordaining. In a simple and unimpressive ritual I was stripped of my hair, my clothes, my name, and of all of my belongings. I became Nagasena, a Buddhist *koyin-gyi*⁸⁵ monk.

During the entire next month I lived like a monk. I slept on a mattress-less bed in a little wooden shack perched on stilts above the ground. I got up before sunrise, recited *mantras*, showered by throwing a bucket of cold water over my body, shaved my head, put on my maroon-colored robes, and then stood in the alms queue like a vertebra in the skeleton of a docile snake. I ate twice a day, did manual chores, and stopped looking

at a mirror—not out of restriction, but out of aversion towards my old self, fearing that Nagasena would recognize old Alexander even behind those eastern clothes, and even without all that beard and hair, once the color of acorns.

Sybil and I used to bicker over the color of my hair. She insisted I was a maroon-haired hipster. She explained the word maroon came from the French *marron*, meaning chestnut. Thus Alexander used to be her chestnut man. I never agreed. Mine was the color of acorns, rather brown and light.

But Nagasena knew he must hold no preference. So I let the color darken and spill all over me, in the wraps and folds of my new maroon *sanghati*⁸⁶ robes. Finally, I surrendered to the color of chestnuts.

Under *bhikkhu*'s guidance I practiced meditation for several hours a day. I was making baby-steps on my path towards mindfulness, aiming to concentrate on every breath, on every single act or movement, and on the changing tides in my thoughts and emotions. I tried hard, and I was still failing, perhaps exactly because of all that effort I kept putting behind.

Each attempt to enter a state of meditation resulted in its exact opposite. As if I had stirred up a nest of baby snakes hidden deep below the surface, hundreds of different thoughts crawled out from the corners of my unsettled mind. One by one, I tried to push each of them aside. But one after another, crazy little thoughts kept stretching themselves wide.

You were given a powerful name,' *bhikkhu* told me when I shared my struggle with him. 'Naga means a snake, *sena* is an army. Nagasena is an army of snakes. But you need to face those baby snakes first. Understand their ways. Then tame them, before they grow big. Only then you can be in control of your army.'

I struggled with the heat, the sweat lodged into each crease of my skin, the pins and needles in my lotus-folded legs, the mosquitos in the air, and the idleness of the meditative sessions. Whenever I tried to tame the baby snakes of my memories and

undone desires, my math chatterbox surfaced up. I visualized quadrics and revolving solids, I constructed logical proofs and differential equations. The golden *pagoda* would suddenly resemble a *Riemann sum* volume⁸⁷ of disks stuck one upon another. The shape reminded me of the chestnut cone turned upside down, or that of Gabriel's trumpet of truth, with its mouthpiece up in the skies, and its bell kissing the earth. Then I recalled one of my first (and last) conversations with Stefan. 'Many *pagodas* follow the shape of an alms bowl, turned upside down,' he had explained. 'I like that image, although some orientalist claimed the *pagoda* shape to be a symbol of a rice pile with a lotus bud stuck on its top.'

My mind was capering from the calculus of stacked disks to *pongyi* bowls to heaps of rice, and of course all the way back again. It all felt as if I was loosing ground, as if the absolute truth of my math was all I could still hold on to. The rest of my world was collapsing into insanity.

I felt I was stepping deeper into darkness. *Bhikkhu* saw everything.

'Tomorrow you will step into the world again,' he said. 'You will not be alone. I'll show you how to live in this world without being affected by it. Let us turn you into a lotus.' That was the beginning of a month spent on the road.

၀၀၀၀ *The Algebra of Bliss*

*Anicca, dukkha, anatta*⁸⁸

Dhammapada

Bhikkhu's initial attempts to cultivate a bur into a lotus flower were still barren. Yet he wouldn't give up on me.

'In a single act or gesture, a million lives are contained,' he said one day.

'It sounds a bit slushy for a *sutta*⁸⁹' I replied. 'How am I to understand it?' I turned all fidgety, apprehending one more of his brain-twisting lessons. He was artlessly sagaciousness. I knew that some more of my erroneous assumptions and distorted perceptions were about to be ground at the blades of his delusive simplicity.

'If you wanted a sermon, you should have stayed at the monastery,' he said. 'In fact, there would be no need to cross any rivers and mountains to be here. A book and a quiet room would have sufficed,' he added with a fine-drawn smile, totally undisturbed. He never bothered to take anything I said as an affront.

I dropped all my questions. It was futile to argue with him. We sat together quietly, I do not know for how long. It could have been an hour, maybe even two, because in a state of meditative reflection, the sense of time can easily atrophy. I realized that I had somehow stopped being restive during those intervals of physical and mental inactivity. Until not that long ago, unguided meditation felt almost maddening.

In my novice days at the monastery, *bhikkhu* had given me a *mantra* and a prayer string made of teak wood beads. He asked me to spend the day in silent chanting. Less than an hour into my session, feeling my body stiffened from the lotus posture, and suffering from an unbearable sensation of pins and needles in my sleeping legs, I declared myself unfit for that kind of spiritual practice. 'What is the point of repeating the same word over and over again?' I asked him. 'Not only do I find it utterly boring, but I feel I could

easily go mad, moving in circles like this!’ *Bhikkhu*’s expression seemed so stern, that I instantaneously regretted my statement—but the moment I, almost apologetically, stepped back and took a deep bow, he let out a loud laughter. ‘It is boring, you say, almost maddening—this simple task I gave to you. How interesting! Your whole life you’ve kept doing exactly that, going around in circles, reaching nowhere, yet you never got bored of that humdrum. But when I ask you to put that same principle in service of your awareness, you cannot last even a day!’ He was right, so totally accurate in describing the illness of my mind and the madness of my paltry pursuits. Yet his sincerity hurt me. That very same plain-spokenness which I had always been devoted to, suddenly seemed unbearable.

Sitting silently in the shade of a tree, I now recalled that conversation, aware of the change which his words—irrespective of their tone —always managed to trigger in me.

At the corner of the street, less than thirty feet away from us, a young woman stood behind her stall of lilies and lotuses. Her stall looked like a painting, fringed by a swarm of endemic tiny bees of insatiable itch for the pollen inside those blooms. Many of the flowers were still in a bud, and every time someone came to buy, the woman took a few stems out of the water vessel and, with swift but careful tweaks, unwrapped their guard petals. I thought her gestures were no less than a delicate rite, a prayer in motion. Those wide-open lilies smiled at the sky, the hundred tiny bees smiled at the lilies, and the devotees smiled back at the flower seller. ‘Now, *this* is perfection, contained in a single frame,’ I uttered, never in control of my silence.

‘There will be no more *suttas* for a while,’ *bhikkhu* quickly dismissed my words. ‘We will be silent. Words have impaired you. In fact, they have disfigured your world,’ he added, eyes full of some strange compassion, as if doubtful of my capacity to grasp much of anything worth understanding.

I didn’t dare utter a word, afraid of what he might say or do next. If words were the building blocks of my comprehension of the world, silence seemed to be the very breath

of his existence. He navigated through it with a flair of a spider behind a wide-spread net, ready at any moment to devour a cloddish thought of mine.

‘Unless you learn how to lavish time without expecting anything in return, you are in a state of dormancy.’

‘How can this be true?’ I asked. ‘Am I to lull myself into laziness, waste my life in idleness, hibernate like a bat in the cave of my inner darkness?’ I asked almost angrily.

‘Do you really think you are better than a bat?’ he quipped. ‘Look at the way you have been living—weaving through the days, trying to avoid that unknown malaise that makes you want to squiggle in some corner and just rest. Your so-called living is nothing but a mental slumber, a real hibernation of the soul. And do you know why? Because you are hypnotized by your words which claim to describe all you ever see or experience. You are a man of sophisticated words. You will have to drop those words, Nagasena, if you are to understand anything!’

I showed him my contention by remaining silent.

‘All right,’ he laughed at my childish fit of pique, stood up and took me by the arm. ‘Let us practice mindfulness by the lakeside. I’ll take you there. Try to drop your words and thoughts in the water, and I will see how many of them I am be able to catch. And don’t be naive—no-one asked you to stop talking. Let me use your math phraseology, if I may,’ he said, giggling. ‘Voicelessness is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for attaining silence.’

.....

The cloudless sky promised another scorching day. Dust, the color of tarnished silver, covered everything, from the road ahead, to the leaves and branches of the nearby trees. Hawkers stood behind their wooden carts on wheels, inviting customers for a cup of sugarcane juice or a plate of fruits. It wasn’t a clamored street; rather than shouting, the vendors rang tiny chiming bells. *Bhikkhu* and I set near the Taungthaman Lake and drank a cup of tea.

‘Don’t be fooled by the simplicity,’ *bhikkhu* warned me, ‘it is deliberate.’

He caught me contemplate over the thousand teakwood pillars of the famed old U Bein Bridge. I had expected to see a landmark worth its hype, but those tall trunks, planted in the lake like stilts of a clown—or thin flamingo legs—seemed so ordinary. The structure, quite simple and plain, did in no way unveil traces of the marvelous. Yet, an intangible feeling of restfulness embosomed me. I slowly became aware of the discreet, pulsating energy of all the people who made the bridge a part of their everyday lives.

That life, that energy of the bridge, came from many sources and directions. It was contained in both the uttered and the silent chants of the monks who crossed the lake in their velvet *hnyat-phanat*⁹⁰ slippers, carrying nothing but maroon toddy-palm fans in their hands. The vibe could be sensed in the submerged voices of the caged lucky-birds that waited to be released by some meritorious stranger. I heard a haunting *sarangi* tune followed by a longing voice of a very old man who sang with a soul of a lover. The bridge had the color of the wavering robes of the numberless monks and nuns who crossed over it.

Underneath the rhythmic swaying of the wooden planks, at the feet of those decaying teakwood pillars, stood the fishermen. Half submerged in water and fully burnt by the sun, they threw their nets high and far. A woman wearing a large conical hat stood on the edge of her wooden boat, rowing behind her paddling of a one hundred ducks.

The air was laced with the voices of the souvenir sellers and the chiming sound of the triangular *kyeezee*⁹¹ bells. The soul of the bridge was all that and much more. As simple and serene, as a moment of meditation. As weighty with attributes and meanings, as life itself.

‘And here you are again, tricked into aesthetics’, *bhikkhu* spoke all of a sudden, noticing the subtle tremble of my lips. ‘You are surrendering to a rising tide of awe in your chest,’ he smiled compassionately. ‘Earlier, you let your mind strip your senses of the

clues of the invisible. And now, you are letting your sentiments create blind spots on the screen of your perception. Each time you are missing a point.'

Bhikkhu was serene and carried the same unpretentious smile, I will remember him for.

'That haunting *sarangi* tune may sound like a song of love, like a surrender,' he said. 'But if you listen closely, you will recognize pain, betrayed dreams, and sorrow of an old man whose every song may become his last.

'You see those men submerged in water, with waist bags made of fishnet, as they occasionally throw a fish or two inside those bags. But did you look at the fish—did you see the way they splash their tails, unable to breathe, but unable to die either? When the fisherman goes deeper inside the lake, the fish is again in water—entangled in the net, but still alive. And when the fisherman's hips emerge out of the water, the fish feels suffocated and gets the foretaste of death. Each of us carries some of the reality and nature of that fish. We are caught in this cycle of illusion and suffering, yet we forget the inevitable every time we experience but a moment of a brief relief.

'And that caged bird keeps waiting for the palms of the stranger who will pay a few hundred *kyats* for its freedom. But once set free, the bird might not even be able to enjoy the freedom it now so much longs for. Its wings are bruised, its heart frightened. It will likely get caught again by the same hands which have put it here, just like the man returns to the same place of ignorance and sorrow, life after life.

'You must be thinking that you could at least cling to those smiles of the monks you see, including mine. After all, their laughter, their smiles have to be signs of bliss. But that bliss, that joy, is not of the kind known to you. Spend a year in a monastery, and you will see. Your face will have to lose every last one of its distinctive traits, before you can claim such a smile.'

I stood there, numb like a schoolboy, without a clue how to solve his homework. I knew I had messed things up due to the way I perceived and analyzed the world around me. Yet I could not find a hint, a thread to hold onto. Perhaps because there wasn't any.

‘Should I have seen *dukkha* everywhere?’ I asked.

‘If you were more mindful,’ he replied, ‘your *karuna* would have made you feel the pain of the others rather than getting carried away by the fleeting beauty of the moment. You may say the beauty is in the eye of the beholder, but that beholder is ignorant.’

I remained silent. Silence seemed better than the risk of saying something stupid.

‘It is neither this nor that,’ he finally said. ‘There is a bigger lesson to be learnt, that of *shunyata*, emptiness, void, zero if you wish.

‘Take any object that you see. Empty it from your own interpretations. Keep it free from your past experience and from your present emotions. Do not relate it to anything else. Do not let your intellect break it into pieces, nor your imagination assemble it into something it is not. If you truthfully strip the object of all these attributes, you will realize its emptiness. It is empty, non-substantial.

‘Take it as an exercise. Let it become a part of your mindfulness.

‘Everything is transient. All is suffering. There is no self. *Nama rupa*⁹², *aneiksa*, *doukkha*, *anatta*.⁹³’

.....

‘You seem to be fond of complicated concepts and theories,’ said Bhikkhu Mamaka. ‘But the greatness of Buddha’s way is in its simplicity. Take, for example, a simple formula, which we can derive from Buddha’s teachings.’

‘A formula?’ I asked, unable to hide both my surprise and excitement.

‘Why not?’ he chuckled. ‘Buddha’s message has been translated into many languages. Mathematics is also a language, right? I may not be able to speak it as well as you do, but let me show you something.’

A small branch from a tree and a piece of barren soil was all he needed. He sat on the ground in a comfortable position. Using a small dry bough, he wrote the following formula on soil:

$$\text{Bliss} = \frac{\text{number of selfless acts}}{\text{number of attachments (or desires)}}$$

‘The root cause of all suffering is our attachment to objects and people,’ he started. ‘Thus you can lessen your suffering if you abandon this clinging, curb your greed, and give up desires. The more one desires, the lesser his bliss. So if a seeker reaches the point where he can let go of all his attachments, we will divide by zero, and there will be an infinite bliss.

‘On the other hand, Buddha teaches *karuna*⁹⁴, compassion. The more acts of generosity and selflessness one is ready to make, the greater the merit, and thus the greater the bliss.

‘Now, there is a catch here,’ he paused and smiled. ‘Many people are not able to let go of all the material desires and ambitions. So they barely manage to control the number of attachments. Yet they try to balance by earning more merit through charitable acts. The problem is that attachments are a greedy beast. You feed it, and it grows bigger, until one day it tries to swallow you. Bliss cannot be achieved without doing both at the same time: letting go of desires, and growing more compassionate towards every living being.’

‘I have just one question,’ I said. ‘What happens if both are zero?’

Bhikkhu looked into my eyes for at least a minute, without saying a word. He then smiled, closed his eyes and asked me to also close mine.

‘It cannot happen,’ he finally spoke. ‘There are stories of people greedy for enlightenment. Hermits ready to live a life of renouncement and austerity. Seekers who believed enlightenment was the final accomplishment, the ultimate reward. So they tried to detach themselves from the world, hoping to turn that denominator into a zero. But they forgot two important things.

‘The first one is that the desire for an enlightenment in itself becomes an attachment. The word for desire is *taṇhā*. Buddha called this craving—this wish for spiritual perfection, for self-annihilation, for cessation of pain—*vibhava-taṇhā*. So even those who cling to spiritual desires, keep their denominator at least equal to one. If such a person feels no compassion, then the value of his bliss becomes equal to zero.

‘The second thing is that, Buddha’s path, if practiced properly, always leads to a dissolution of the ego. One becomes one with the whole universe. And then every act becomes selfless—there is no other way. How can one really understand and accept *dukkha* as the nature of life, if he separates himself from others? It can’t be. Meditation leads to awareness, and that awareness makes you feel connected to the whole universe. That way, one becomes full of life; no-one is more alive than an enlightened being, a *buddha*.

‘But a man who just tries to cut off all his attachments without any consideration other than his own benefit, is surely on the path towards death. If, through his spiritual practice, he is not becoming more compassionate, then he must be doing something wrong. Think of it—a dead man has no attachment, does he?’

၁၀၃၈၈ The Flame of the Forest

*The philosopher's stone in a fool's hand would vanish
as fast as hailstones that come with the rain.*

Indian Saying

There is no other place like Mount Popa, the abode of the *nat*⁹⁵ spirits, *zawgyi* alchemists and *weikza* wizards. The legend says that, a century after Buddha attained enlightenment, a strong earthquake shook the plains and gave birth to the cone-like mountain covered in luscious greenery and most beautiful flowering trees. On that mountain, a flower-eating ogress and a royal flower-picker committed themselves to an impossible love.

In those redolent forests, the red-hatted alchemist, in pursuit of youthfulness and longevity, gathered sorcerous plants, meandered with a magical wand in his hand and a mercury stone hidden under his armpit, and lied buried in soil, to gain life of a thousand years.

That place, Bhikkhu Mamaka said, would be the last tie-in to the world of the esoteric. Once I am over and done with it, he said, I might finally get onto the real thing of searching for the truth within, rather than without.

In the foothills of that volcanic hill, we spent the night at a roadside *zayat*⁹⁶, a public rest house built to provide shelter to travelers and laymen pilgrims.

‘What happened?’ *bhikkhu* prodded with a smile. ‘Are you afraid that a *nat* might come and infest your dreams during the night?’

I gawkily smiled. I feared neither spirits nor junkies, but the mere thought of spiders, scorpions and snakes could throw me into a panic.

Our shelter, consisting of a three-by-four-meter platform raised upon wooden poles, was in disrepair. We had a roof above our heads but not a single piece of wall. The floor creaked under our steps. Even those large pillars, coated with burgundy lacquer, squeaked just the same.

Someone must have swiped the floor that very same day, for there was no trace of dust or any dry foliage. As I leaned on one of the teakwood pillars, examining the locality, my eyes dived into the deep green which surrounded us. Perhaps it was not the season yet, but I could not recognize any other color on that mountain of flowers. I could not see frangipani, *the flame of the forest*⁹⁷, not the rain tree. Only green. Radiant, endless green.

‘Sleep,’ *bhikkhu* said. He knew I was exhausted from the journey.

I do not know whether that night some ogres, or sorcerers, or the spirits of the mountain played tricks on me, but I had the most restless sleep in a very long time. I kept waking up again and again, but the darkness was so black, that opening my eyes was of no use. At one point I felt some strange crawling over my face, and I thought it must be one of those giant, hairy-legged spiders of the forest. I screamed in horror, and kept rubbing and scratching my skin to get rid of it. Strangely, my screams did not wake *bhikkhu*. Even if they did, he didn’t bother to let me know. I felt so tired that, finally, I somehow fell back asleep. I woke up one more time feeling a twitch in my finger, followed by a sharp pain. I pulled back my arm which had been lying stretched on the floor, and I jumped again in fright. I imagined a large forest rat must have chewed on my finger. This went on and on. I do not know how many times I woke up and fell back asleep.

But when, at dawn, I finally opened my eyes, I felt tremendously happy to be able to finally see. A foot away from me there was *bhikkhu*, sitting with his folded legs, looking at me affectionately. Something was wrong.

‘Do not worry,’ he said. ‘Those scrapes will quickly heal. Here, take some water and gently wash your face.’

I instinctively touched my cheeks. My skin was burning. My eyes must have been full of questions. *I cannot see your face*, the voice rang in my ears.

‘No need to think about it,’ said *bhikkhu*. ‘You must have scratched yourself during the night. Do you remember anything?’

I told him about the troubles I had faced, and shared the dreams which could have been real. He listened, nodded, and said one thing.

‘Nagasena, the body grapples to survive. Were you alert when all this happened...not awake, but mindful?’

It was a rhetorical question, of course. To remain mindful in the face of a dreadful experience is an important test for a monk. For once, I was happy that I had no mirror, and that I could not see the sores on my face. They were marks of my failure, and I felt humiliated.

Suddenly, as if out of nowhere, a few villagers appeared. They brought fresh water and food-alms. They cordially exchanged a few words with *bhikkhu*. An elderly woman stared at my face long enough to make me feel uncomfortable. She then said something to her companion—a teenage girl, likely her granddaughter. The girl suddenly left running, only to return ten or fifteen minutes later, carrying a small tin box. The old woman took it and sat face-to-face across me. She opened the box, dipped her finger inside it, and then started applying some ointment on my face. I was humbled. I looked towards *bhikkhu*.

‘No need to say anything,’ *bhikkhu* said. ‘You have given her an opportunity to earn merit.’

When she was done, I placed my palms together and looked at her with gratitude. *Nagasena*, I thought, *you do not speak their language. And even if you did, you do not know*

if saying ‘thank you’ would be appropriate. You must somehow learn the way of expressing gratitude not through your tongue, but through your entire being.

The villagers finally left, and so *bhikkhu* and I were alone again.

‘That woman believed that your *parami*⁹⁸, spiritual qualities, are the ones that have brought you here,’ he said. ‘She thought that only someone who had acquired merit and virtue in his previous life would be ready—like you—to leave his home and become a monk here, in a new land, ready to sleep in a *zayat*, and to struggle with *nats* and other forest beings.’

Those words did not make me feel any better. Why would I care about some past lives of which I could not remember anything? What’s their value, when I am no longer bothered even with the life which, two months ago, I still considered my own?

When we finished our food I asked *bhikkhu* where we would go.

‘Nowhere,’ he replied and laughed mirthfully. ‘He will come here. He always does.’

‘Who?’ I asked. ‘Who are we waiting for?’

‘Bo Bo Zin,’ he said. ‘My good old *weikza* friend.’

‘Do you believe in magic?’ I was surprised. I knew that most members of the *Sangha* dismissed the ideas of esoteric knowledge and occult practices.

‘I believe in the power of his belief. Bo Bo Zin has not spent a single night in the valley, in well over fifty years. Up in the hill, there is no plant he has not seen the root of. There is no crystal in those rocks, he has not seen the color of. He is not afraid of spiders, scorpions or snakes. And whenever he leaves the forest to be with people, he does it for their sake. He counsels, he heals.’

‘Can he fly the skies and traverse the underground?’ I flinched at *bhikkhu*’s description. It took me three complete breaths to regret it, suddenly conscious that my behavior was not worthy of monk’s robes. Mindfulness is also the ability to get rid of internalized attitudes. Especially when they can easily hurt others.

I immediately bowed and apologized.

Bhikkhu remained unmoved by either of my gestures.

‘All right,’ he responded. ‘You are a man of so many books. What do you know of *weikzas*?’

I collected myself and recited, like a school boy, everything I had ever read or heard about the legendary Burmese magicians. To talk about *weikzas* is possible only in an argot; as I started listing all I knew, I remembered many ethnological and mythological tropes Vuk had once shared with me.

‘A *weikza* is an occult recluse,’ I began. ‘He aims to become an absolute master of the worldly realms, to achieve a never-ceasing youthfulness, longevity and immunity to material decay. He wanders the forests and hills in search of medicinal plants, crystals, and elements he can use in alchemy, astrology and meditation. He has power to heal and protect, he can cast spells and see the future. He can act as an exorcist and control benevolent and malignant *nat* spirits. He is also a geomancer. He uses chants, incantations and spells, inscribes diagrams, tattoos and mighty talismans filled with geometric patterns, formulas and lucky numbers on sheets which are to be burnt, their ashes diluted in water, and then drank for the magic to work. He can speak many languages and he can appear in someone’s dream. He can be seen in two places at the same time, become invisible, or possess someone’s body. As a sorcerer par excellence and a metaphysical savant, he can also materialize things. He fulfills all his desires instantaneously. Yet he remains on Buddha’s path, and thus unselfishly helps those who are in need. His fixation on longevity or immortality is rooted in the desire to outwit the cycle of rebirth and be around when the Future Buddha, *Maitreya*, incarnates. He believes that only at the feet of *Maitreya* can he attain *nibanna*.’

As I spoke, *bhikkhu* listened attentively. His discrete smile reminded me of the face expressions I kept seeing on all statues of Buddha. *Bhikkhu* did not comment. He just closed his eyes and entered into a deep meditation.

And the wizard did come on his own. I cannot say that I noticed his arrival. One moment there were just *bhikkhu* and I, sitting calmly and telling our beads. Then the next moment I could hear the euphoric laughter of two men. They were so exuberant with joy, as if all thirty seven *nats* of Mount Popa had started a *pwé⁹⁹* festival. The reunion of these two old friends contained so much energy and so much happiness, that I imagined a sudden flowering of *the flame of the forest tree*, somewhere up those mystical slopes of the mountain. I shared the thought.

‘The poet is not from around here,’ Bo Bo Zin said, laughing. ‘Otherwise, he would have known how to choose a better flower.’

I knew I had said something wrong, but I did not dare ask.

‘Nagasena still has a lot to learn,’ *bhikkhu* chose to be generous. ‘Moreover, he is a mathematician, not a botanist.’

Botany, of course. What would have Mia done? She would have certainly run her palms through every plant she had not seen before. She would have shared the Latin taxonomy of all the trees in those mystical hills. She would have even dared sneak her fingers inside that cotton bag Bo Bo Zin carried over his shoulder, to check the roots and the barks and the dried medicinal herbs he had stashed there.

Did *bhikkhu* mention botany on purpose? For so many days I rarely thought of Mia. It was almost as if my mind had dropped her name like the branch lets go of its withering leaf. And suddenly, I started seeing her everywhere.

So many thoughts crossed my mind. *Is this a spiritual paranoia? Am I really considering the possibility of Bhikkhu Mamaka knowing about Mia and me? This is ridiculous. Half an hour ago I was the one distrustful towards the idea of meeting a weikza, and now I suspect that my Master telepathically messes with my head.*

Funny enough, I had completely forgotten that Bhikkhu Mamaka himself held a graduate degree in biology.

‘Nagasena,’ Bo Bo Zin suddenly spoke to me, as if, using his magical wand, he blew, at once, off all my regressions. ‘Look at the flower from *the flame of the forest tree*.’

I realized he had placed a cluster of vermillion-colored, parrot-looking flowers in my palm.

‘Smell it,’ he said, before I got a chance to articulate my surprise. I had no idea where those flowers came from.

‘It has no fragrance,’ I said.

‘Exactly. Unless you want to offend, do not tell anyone that they remind you of *the flame of the forest*. Centuries ago, a Burmese monk said that, a man of good appearance who is empty from inside, is like this *pauk*¹⁰⁰ flower—beautiful but scentless. Nagasena, do you understand now?’

I must have looked ridiculous to Bo Bo Zin. Thankfully, I was at least wearing monk’s robes. There was nothing fancy about my looks. If nothing else, I would not be called *the flame of the forest*. But a fool—maybe.

Neither he wore red clothes, nor did he have anything eccentric on him. Dressed in white, Bo Bo Zin carried just a simple grey bag over his shoulders. He had long but kempt black hair and beard, and he looked just a bit older than me. He wore a long-sleeved shirt and a *longyi*-type of a lower, so I could not see much of his skin. However, I did notice the black tattoos on his wrists—one of which seemed like a tiger, and the rest of them shapes and cyphers I could tell nothing of.

I noticed tattooed runes too. Burmese runes are nothing like the European ones which are still used for divination. A Burmese rune is a magic square, a quadratic grid either filled with letters of the alphabet, or with selected numbers. The runes are often tattooed on the body, or sometimes inscribed on paper, to act as talismans and magic tools. They are the secret formulas of the Burmese wizard.

When I looked a bit closer at that three-by-three square on Bo Bo Zin's hand, I recognized circles and a few of my lemniscates. Even the *weikza* carried the infinity with him—or within him. Maybe grasping that infinity was the goal of his peculiar spiritual practice. Maybe all his wandering, incantations and rites only served the purpose of bringing him a step closer to that infinity.

There was something deep and puzzling in Bo Bo Zin's eyes; when I looked at them, I got a strange feeling of being swallowed at once. Yet the very next moment his eyes became impenetrable, as if he no longer wanted me to dive into their depth. There is also this possibility that I was projecting onto him some thirst for an esoteric experience. I was reminded of *bhikkhu's* lesson about the emptiness of all things. I needed to stop imagining the depth of Bo Bo Zin's being. It was not mine to fill it with imagined attributes.

'Ask,' Bo Bo Zin invited. 'Whatever you wish to know, just ask.'

'Can you show me how to see the future? Can you teach me to levitate? Can you make me a healer?' I asked these three stupid questions, and immediately regretted. *Nagasena, don't be an idiot. You sound like that poor fisherman who was granted three stupid wishes from a gold fish.'*

Bo Bo Zin did not even blink.

'You want to be a soothsayer,' he began. 'But do you know your present? Can you be a witness of each one of your breaths? Every single moment slips through your sieve-like mind. Then what's the point seeing the future beforehand, if you are going to waste it just like you are wasting your present?

'You want to grow wings,' he continued, 'but before you beat gravity, you need to learn how to walk first. Is your step firm? Are you fully aware and alert while you drag your feet? Tell me, who can run before he even learns to walk?

'And then, have you healed yourself before you began healing others? How can a sick man heal the ailing? Look at you—a simple climb up this hill robbed your chest of

breath, covered your feet in blains, and filled you mind with frustration. Who are you to tell if someone else is sick?

‘One step at a time, young man. You are not yet ready to hatch. When the time comes, it will happen on its own. It will not be a miracle any different from the miracle of life. It will be a natural progression of things.

‘You won’t need to wear a funny hat, nor to twist your tongue and recite chants. There will be no need to stay in the cave and challenge the bats and the *nats* of the forest. You will be that tree, and the bat, and the *nat* and the Master. You will have the roots of a tree, the wings of a bird, and the gills of a fish. You’ll be able to dive and soar all you want. You will have the consciousness of a Buddha and the eye that can see everything at once.

‘Do you understand, young man?’

‘I think I do,’ I replied.

The next moment, Bo Bo Zin was gone. Either he had quick feet of a forest deer, or he simply vanished in thin air.

‘Where did he go?’ I asked in disbelief.

‘You never know,’ *bhikkhu* replied. ‘He might have run back to his forest friends. But I suspect he’s already climbed up the stairs of Taungkalat Monastery. He may be chortling at us right now, holding a fat *cheroot*¹⁰¹ in one hand, and a bottle of liquor in the other, standing at the shrine of Ko Gyi Kyaw, the *nat* spirit who loves to gamble and get drunk!’

၀ဉ္စ၀ *Emptiness*

*The knowledge that is in books, and the wealth that is not in one's hands,—
the one is not knowledge, and the other not wealth, when occasion arises.*

- Lokanīti -

‘**Y**ou often see things to which others remain blind, yet you somehow miss the obvious,’ *bhikkhu* said.

‘What does that make me?’ I daringly looked into his eyes. ‘A schizophrenic?’

‘That makes you a fertile ground for the seed of transformation.’

‘Who will plant the seed?’

‘That is no longer your concern,’ he replied with a smile which both assured and frightened.

‘Then, what is my stake in it?’

‘You will need to ravel out the roots of the past from the furrows of your mind.’

If only I knew how! I despaired at his use of metaphors. So much has grown under the surface, I thought. I’ve fertilized my identity with academic degrees and recognitions, borrowed knowledge, love attachments and failures, fleeting friendships and a horde of emotions. The turnip has grown giant. I cannot uproot it alone. I need to hold on its shoots, and a whole lot of people (perhaps monks) need to hold on me, before we all start to pull, pull and pull together. I suddenly burst into a laughter.

The Master laughed along, as if amused by the naive never-ending how-why questions of a grown up child.

‘What matters is not how, but are you willing to,’ he replied, very much in the manner of Enoch, my frenemy cobbler.

‘Are you ready to empty your pockets of all the fake gems you carry around? To drop your regrets with as little pain as if they were baby teeth? To make the present moment all you have got, like a convict who will be executed tomorrow?’

I felt a throbbing sensation in my temples and soreness in my limbs. My helplessness translated into a silent plea for clarity.

‘Many think they want to find the truth,’ he said, ‘but only a few cannot live without it. Wanting is not enough. When you start aching to know—and not before you are totally repulsed by the world—the path opens.’

‘I have no intellectual or academic interest in the awakening,’ I replied. ‘And evidently, I am quite old to be confused for some longhaired neo-hippie, or a New Age treehugger. I came because...’

Before I could complete my inscrutable thought, he spared me the distress.

‘You came because life dragged you here. It is about time you admit you were never in control of any major thing in your life.’

‘So, there is nothing I could do,’ I concluded, almost triumphantly.

He remained silent for a brief while, before he threw at me another challenge.

‘Suppose I took you to a very special place, a sacred *pagoda*,’ he said. ‘And then I showed you three golden doors, and asked you to pick one. The doors look same, but one of the doors is special—behind it, you can find *Buddhahood*. The other two are empty. What would you say? Would you...’

‘Eh,’ I interrupted him before he could complete. ‘Are you asking me if I am ready to gamble with my spiritual progress? You have a Buddhist version of the famous Monty Hall problem. What’s the point of giving a probability riddle to a professional mathematician?’

‘I have no knowledge of the math you are talking about,’ the Master replied. ‘My question is about three golden doors of a *pagoda*.’

I smiled and dismissed his reply, certain he was bluffing. ‘It is such a well known puzzle,’ I said, ‘that even kids have heard of it. You can see it in movies, read about it in books,’ I added. I started elaborating confidently, as if he were some young student of mine. I was not even aware of how ridiculously arrogant I must have sounded.

‘It is a game of chance,’ I continued. ‘A man is shown three doors and invited to pick one. If he is lucky, he can win a prize—something valuable is hidden behind one of the doors. If he opens a wrong door, however, he will be greeted by a bleating a goat.

‘So, the contestant picks up a door and announces his choice.

‘Now, there is a particular caveat to the game. Once the man selects a door, that door is not immediately opened. Instead, of the remaining two doors—the one which hides no reward—is opened.

‘We know that at least one of the rejected two doors hides no reward, and thus this can always be done.

‘The player is now offered to rethink his choice. He can either stick to the door he had initially picked, or he can switch to the other closed door.

‘Most people consider this new information irrelevant. They believe that, since there are only two doors remaining, they have one in two chance to be right, regardless which door they choose.

‘But they are wrong. They overlook the fact that a prize-less room was opened only *after* one of the doors had been picked.

‘So, let us look at the problem from the perspective of theoretical probability,’ I proposed.

I grabbed a small twig from the ground, and started drawing in the dirt (shamelessly imitating *bhikkhu*’s style of instructions). I drew three doors, labelled them appropriately, drew disjoint circles to represent probability events and illustrate the

solution. Teaching was my comfort zone and it was always incredibly easy to engage in it, even when I was not really invited to.

‘At the start of the game,’ I said, ‘our guy has one in three chance to be right, regardless which door he selects. Probability assigned to each door is $1/3$.

‘If we separate the door he picked (let’s name it A) from the two rejected (B and C), then the probability that the prize is behind a rejected door is $2/3$.

‘When one of the rejected doors is open (say B), the probability that the reward is either behind door B or door C is still equal to $2/3$. But since we now know that there is nothing behind the door B, we can conclude that that the door C inherited the joint probability of the two doors. So the chance that C is winning has now increased to $2/3$. Since the probability that the reward is behind door A is still equal to $1/3$, obviously our guy should switch to door C, in order to maximize the chance of winning the game.’

‘Hmm,’ the Master mumbled and started to laugh hearing me finish my rather long and triumphant expose. He did not interrupt. ‘I now understand,’ he finally said. ‘Okay, let us complete the challenge. I am still willing to give you a chance to choose right.’

He invited me to follow him. The road was rutted by bullock carts. We only stopped once at (what seemed like) a vegetable shop—a small hut set up under the branches of a fig tree. After a brief and cordial chat with the shopkeeper I could not understand a word of, *bhikkhu* accepted a branch of bananas, and quickly pushed it into my hands. ‘Take it, you will need some energy,’ he said.

Unwillingly leaving the shade of the thatch, I accepted the unusual alms, and stumbled under the weight of the bananas. Give or take, it must have been at least five kilograms. ‘Carry it over your shoulder,’ he suggested, mocking my clumsiness. After having considered a couple of other alternatives, I dispiritedly accepted his idea. I must have looked ridiculous—I had nothing of the dignity of the peripatetic learner I once aspired to become.

After a solid, forty-minute walk through the hills, a small golden *pagoda* bathed in sun glittered in front of us. I thought the old monk's question had been symbolic, until he showed me three large doors covered in gold paint and decorated with long-tongued, dragon-like faces.

'Choose,' he pointed towards the three identical doors, and stepped five feet behind, barely giving me the time to drop the branch of bananas of my shoulder, before I could test my odds. I thought it would be a fun thing to do, this eastern spiritual simulation of a counterintuitive game of statistics.

'I choose the third door, the one on the right,' I said. 'It is east-oriented, so that is the only hint I am going to take.'

The Master nodded with no apparent judgment, and stepped forward. *Out of the two remaining doors, at least one is empty*, I thought. *He will now open it for me, and invite me to reconsider my choice*. I boasted with confidence.

He stepped forward, placed a large gold-colored key in the middle door's lock, made a loud screeching noise, and opened it. There was nothing behind the door.

'So, what are you going to do?' he asked, slightly raising his eyebrow.

'I am still battling with odds,' I said, 'but I will trust the probabilistic laws of this world. Now that I know the middle hall is empty, I will go for the first door, the one on the left.'

Instead of stepping towards the door of my choice, the monk slammed the middle door, locked it, took me by the arm, and asked me to walk away from the *pagoda*. 'You don't yet belong here,' he said.

'What happened?' I was baffled.

'You failed,' he replied with indignation.

'Oh, I see,' I muttered. 'My spiritual award must have been hidden behind the eastern door. But that is fine. Maximizing probability is not a guarantee of success; after all, I

had only 2/3 favorable odds. I still had thirty-three percent chance of being wrong,' I remained worthy of my reputation of a foolishly gabby disciple. 'I should have trusted my guts, East remains East,' I continued my gibberish talk. 'Is that what you tried to teach me—to follow my intuition and rely less on reason?'

'You still don't understand,' he shook his head in disapproval. 'You were greedy. You wanted to earn, you wanted to deserve *Buddhahood*. You applied your analytical mind to win a game. You were not ready to drop that same imperfect mind which has brought to you so much suffering. You tried to maximize the chance of being right. Going for reason over intelligence—it was the easiest way to lose!'

'You are right—I do not understand. Even if my manners were inadequate, in this little game of yours I still had a chance to attain something worthy. And that goal would have justified my means. What is wrong with that?'

'*Everything* is wrong,' he discarded my argument with a minimalistic reply, and kept walking, with a gaze of a disappointed teacher.

'Please, explain it to me. Teach me!'

'There was no *Buddhahood* behind any of the doors, he sighed. 'At least not the kind of *Buddhahood* you expected to find. At most, you would have found a Buddha statue. And yet Buddha is everywhere!'

'Then, what was the purpose of the puzzle? What would have an intelligent seeker done?'

'He would have entered the middle hall,' he replied.

'But...'

'Yes, the middle hall was empty,' he completed the sentence for me. 'A teacher led you to a state of emptiness, *shunyata*. He spared you the search of what's truly conducive to your growth, to your learning and understanding. You didn't recognize the blessing.'

‘Even without a teacher, you had two in three chance to find the state of emptiness, the no-mind. Life supports the seeker, it gives you favorable odds to begin with. But you chose to hoard rather than to drop.’

With the branch of bananas over my shoulder, I suddenly resembled a hobo carrying a bindle of trifles.

‘You use your mind as a vining rod in search for the precious,’ he spoke again. ‘But finding *Buddhahood* is nothing like gold dowsing. Drop all your creeds, for they are no more than bogus pendulums that point towards the center of gravity of your cunning ego. Drop the very idea of *Buddhahood*!’

Take none, and you will regret; take some, you will still regret, I suddenly remembered. I had thought of attaining *Buddhahood* as if it were some sort of possession, no different than money. It is not my fault I had been conditioned by a society with insatiable greed for more—I tried to find arguments that would justify my stupidity. Oh how much I suddenly missed Vuk and wished he were by my side! He would have understood, better than anyone else, my trial and my failure. What am I even trying to comprehend? Vuk would have never fallen into this trap. He would have entered the empty hall, and slam the golden door from inside!

And just when I thought I had understood my mistake, the Master’s words pushed me further down into an abyss of perplexity.

‘Moreover, you do not listen,’ he wrinkled his brow as he looked at my pathetic state. ‘You were eager to show off your knowledge. The beauty of the riddle was not contained in some complicated mathematics behind it. Had you listened carefully, you would have realized that this was an absurd task.’

He was right. I was now completely lost.

‘Since emptiness is Buddha consciousness itself, you should have asked what was the need for that special *Buddhahood* door. What kind of a trap was hidden behind it? Aren’t all three doors made of gold? And isn’t it all one-and-the-same?’

‘By the way,’ he added shortly, as if my debacle needed any further validation. ‘Should I even mention that you have entirely forgotten Buddha’s message about the importance of choosing the Middle Path? Your whole being should have been drawn towards that golden door that stood in the middle.’

We headed back, silently walking along the steep, narrow path of the same forest. I felt like a student who had just failed an exam and found out he knew so little, that he’d likely fail quite a number of times more, before he’d be able to call himself a graduate. I left the branch of bananas on the side of the road. The sun had already started to descend, and our monk ordinance meant we could not eat anything after noon. I was hoping that some shepherd or hermit would find it. If not, at least some free-grazing goat will.

∞ꣳ A Pond for a Turtle, A Cave for a Monk

*The criterion of water is the water-lily,
the criterion of wisdom is conversation.*

- Dhammanīti -

We spent the night at a monastery in one of the floating villages on Inle, a lake nestled among the magnificent mountain ranges of Shan. We reached the *kyaung* after taking a ride on a small wooden boat. The boatman was a kind man. There were a hundred wrinkles of all shape and size on his prematurely aged face, but it was a face that knew how to wear a smile like no other. Those stained, darkest-red teeth belonged to a betel nut addict. Seeing us stand at the inlet where all the boats were moored, he hurriedly spit the *kun-ya*¹⁰² he had been chewing, came to us and made a deep bow. He was ready to ferry us across the lake.

To the non-conversant observer, this demonstration of deep respect may seem to strengthen the monk's ego. However, the effect is quite the opposite. Having renounced the profane life and his own identity within it, the monk gets rid of even the slightest trace of his old self-image. When he shaves his head and puts on the robes, he does not only forgo his vanity and attachment. He becomes ordinary, common, almost unidentifiable to the common man. He becomes a part of the group, a representative of the *Sangha*. When the devotees bow down to him, they do not bow down to the man in those robes, but to the *Sangha* which those robes represent. The act is a constant reminder to the monk to remain dignified and to keep his focus on the path of spirituality.

From afar, the lake and the distant horizon created a dreamlike scenery. Long and narrow paddy-boats drifted silently, like elongated seedpods whimsically tossed upon the lake surface dotted with water lilies and green aquatic foliage. Boatmen stood erect

at the nooks of their sampans, gracefully balancing the glide using long sticks as oars. The hazy air made the mountains in the backdrop seem almost other-worldly, and the contours of the boatmen more dramatic. Those wooden canes appeared to be reaching the sky, and their holders could, if they wanted to, use them to beat the low-hanging clouds above their heads, and bring rain.

The boatman led us to his motorized sampan in which four people were already seated. The air was fresh, and I welcomed the water droplets that splashed on my face as we rode away from the shore. We stopped only once, to pay homage at the largest local *pagoda* which *bhikkhu* said was among the most revered sacred places in the country. The boat cut through the water. The lake reflected ancient villages dotted with hundreds of *stupas* made of bricks and stone. Giant statues of *chintre*¹⁰³ lions stood in pairs, facing the lake and guarding some of the *pagodas*.

Those shrines stood at the shore, some half-sunk, others girded by creepers, vines and tree roots. Each *stupa* enshrined at least one image of *The Awakened One*. I wondered how many Buddha faces, engulfed by those tree trunks and creeper vines, hidden away from our gaze like gems in the gravel, will never be seen again.

‘Tell me, what do you see?’ *bhikkhu* invited me to share my thoughts.

‘I see decay. And I see beauty in it,’ I said. ‘I know that I should not be carried away by aesthetics, but it is better to tell the truth than to pretend I have stilled my mind.’

I did not think he would spare my statement.

‘Your perception is better than expected,’ he replied. ‘You are no longer a keeper—you did not wish to save those shabby *pagodas* wrapped in twining climbers and buried in shrubs. That’s a start.’

‘Yet I still find the sight so beautiful. Branches are sprouting through the clefts of an old shrine. Wild flowers are blooming by themselves at the dais where devotees once carried *padonmar*¹⁰⁴, *sabai*¹⁰⁵ and *shwe ban*¹⁰⁶ flowers.’

‘You are describing *aneiksa*, the first mark of existence. Nothing is permanent. Human life ends in death, once magnificent *pagodas* turn into ruins. Yet others are born and new *pagodas* are erected—and some fresh *padonmar*, *sabai* and *shwe ban* flowers will be brought to the feet of Buddha. Such is the nature of mundane existence.’

I turned my attention back to the life on the lake. One-legged fishermen carried nets that looked like giant cones with cut-off tops. As they danced across the lake with one leg firmly on the stern and the other wrapped around the wooden oar, the sons of the lake casted their *saung*¹⁰⁷ nets in the shallow waters. One of them swayed his net above the surface, and I saw the circular bamboo base of the cone.

Oh how distant my hometown and that winter night suddenly seemed! Yet the lake no longer smelled of fish, algae and weeds, but of cinder and burnt chestnuts. A mathematician could quit thinking about cones, I thought, if only the cones would make themselves scarce.

I told *bhikkhu* that I wished those *Intha*¹⁰⁸ fishermen knew how to find the exact volume of their conical nets. He smiled and replied that he wished I had seen the circle at the base of their nets.

‘Of course I did,’ I insisted.

‘Not with the eyes of a monk,’ he rebuked. ‘The circle,’ he said, ‘Is a powerful symbol. It represents *samsara*, the wheel of time, the cycle of birth, life, death and rebirth. But it also stands for the zero, *shunyata*, emptiness. Go deep inside *samsara*, the way young Siddhartha did in the palaces of his youth, and you will see the futility and sorrow of it. Step outside of it, observe it, transcend it, and you will properly see the void, the emptiness, the non-self of all things.’

The next day we left our stilted wooden monastery on water. There was another wooden boat, and another kind boatman, this one with no wrinkles on his face and no betel-teeth smile. Our boat crossed path (or, should I better say, crossed water) with another one. In it, a group of young girls, six or eight of them, smiled under their

colorful *parasols*¹⁰⁹, each color vibrant and different from the rest. A Burmese umbrella is a piece of art—the ribs are crafted of bamboo, the canopy made of paper or cloth, and then its surface is lacquered in elegant shapes and patterns. Each parasol looked like a *Dhammachakra*¹¹⁰. I thought I was finally inclined to see every new circle through the eyes of a monk.

.....

‘A pond for a turtle, a cave for a monk,’ *bhikkhu* announced our next destination. ‘In a cave, many hermits and monks have found shelter from the noise and the lures of the world. You should taste meditation in a cave, at least once.’

I followed him. I admired the ease in his feet and that lightness of his spirit. All the paths seemed familiar to him, even though we often moved through forests and remote villages, cut off from any proper road. I often wondered if he ever decided in advance all the places he wanted me to see. His spontaneity was whimsical.

Back home, I used to think I was fond of hiking. Here, I realized I had to unlearn everything I thought I knew about walking in the hills. Hopping over rocks and slopes in solid mountaineering shoes and comfortable clothes was for kids. Try doing the same when you are wearing flip-flops and a monk’s robe! To use an idiom, my soles pained *enough to try the patience of a saint*. I chuckled at the thought. A saint—I doubt I will ever be one.

Mia’s favorite childhood fairytale was *The Princess and the Pea*, as told by Hans Christian Andersen. Incidentally, it was Sybil’s favorite too. It is a story about a prince who desperately searches for a real princess to marry. Sooner or later, he finds a flaw in whichever girl he meets. Then, on a stormy night, a beautiful girl knocks at the door of his castle, asking to be sheltered from the rain. She claims to be a real princess. The prince is immediately attracted to the charming girl, but does not allow himself to fall in love, as he cannot be sure that she is telling the truth, even though everything about her shows sophistication. In order to be certain that she is who she claims to be, the

prince's mother arranges a royal bed for the girl, on which she places twenty or more mattresses. On the bottom of the bed, she also puts a single grain of pea. When in the morning the girl wakes up, she tells the royal family about her sleepless night and how she felt that something on the bed was hurting her. Such sensitivity was a definitive mark of royalty. Delighted that she passed the test, the prince marries a real princess.

So, as I walked through the shrubs of that unknown hill, silently following *bhikkhu's* lead, every little grain of sand between my foot and my flip-flops pricked me. *Nagasena*, I thought to myself, *you are sensitive like the princess on the grain of pea. Unfortunately for you, that doesn't count here. You've passed the wrong test.*

Like we did with many other stories, Vuk and I analyzed this one too. We kept adding layer after layer of meanings and interpretations. We speculated that the story could be a social critique (class immobility), a discourse in morality (deception versus truthfulness), or maybe just a feel-good tale of living-happily-ever-after.

Mia disagreed with both of us. 'We all try to get something in life,' she said. 'We invest so much of ourselves, and yet our pursuit so often goes in vain. Then, one day, all of a sudden, the solution, or maybe even the object of our desire, appears in front of us. Instead of rejoicing, we doubt. "It is too good to be true, so easily obtained to be legit," we argue. Thus we accept it not before we've fully scrutinized it, not before we have submitted it to all sorts of cruel tests and trials. You know what would have been a more realistic ending of the story? The princess should have rejected his proposal and walked away. She shouldn't have married someone who accepted her only after she had ticked off all his stupid boxes.'

I think it was this argument that made Vuk intellectually invested in my girlfriend.

Nagasena, do not go there. Do not let your mind take you back to those old places again.

The hardest thing for a meditator is to keep the mind still. Thoughts pop up like poppies in spring. You close your eyes, cross your legs, and clasp your hands. You focus on your breathing, and feel each breath go in and out. At first, you feel at peace, it all

seems still. But have you seen a poppy stem? It quietly grows tall and green, and it goes unnoticed among the blades of the grass. Then suddenly the bud bursts at the seams, and the crumpled red petals break free.

Slip from the state of mindfulness and, before you know it, the first thought will appear. The bloom of the first poppy in the field. And then the second one too. An exponential progression of blooms you can no longer contain. One day, half of what you see is green. The next day, you find your once green meadow washed completely in the color of rubies. Your mind has turned into a *bein-sar*¹¹¹, an opium-eater, intoxicated with the seeds of the worldly.

Poppies seem beautiful, but they are weeds. And my poppies are mostly numbers, sets, shapes, and solids; sometimes theorems, conjectures and proofs. But sometimes, those weeds are memories of Sybil, Vuk or Mia.

I was dodderly. I felt so happy when we reached a small *zayat*, even though all it could provide us with was a small shade and a place to sit. I had been carrying a bottle of water, but half of it was already gone. I offered it to *bhikkhu*, and he barely took a sip. I finished the rest in one go.

I hardly remember how we finally reached the cave. It wasn't a tiny chamber in the mountain, like those I imagined every time I heard a story about a Christian eremite or an Indian *yogi*. We stood at the entrance of a vast, spacious, high-ceiling cave. Beams of natural light penetrated through several crannies, illuminating the place just enough for us to see magnificent limestone stalactites.

'A castle fit for a monk,' *bhikkhu* remarked.

In one of the chambers stood a modest *pagoda*. I wondered how and why would someone bring material and tools to *erect* a *pagoda* in the back of beyond. I heard flapping of bat wings and felt a strong smell of bat droppings.

A roost cave, a nursery for histoplasmosis and other bat-borne diseases, I thought to myself.

Bhikkhu invited me to sit on the giant flat stone in one of the halls.

‘Tell me everything you see,’ he insisted. ‘Every single thought, no matter how embarrassing it may seem.’

‘This is huge,’ I started. ‘I did not think the cave would be this big.’

‘What else?’

‘I can see a colony of bats on the ceiling,’ I muttered.

‘Carry on,’ he persisted.

‘I wonder whether monks catch a cave disease. With so much bat guano around, it seems rather likely.’

‘And?’

‘And, in spite of the dull, humid air, it still feels better to be inside than to bear the outside heat. I think I can easily spend the night here,’ I concluded.

It was now *bhikkhu*’s turn to rebut.

‘Now, let us look carefully at your description. “The cave is huge,” you said. Right, but compared to what? Your reference point is some book you have read, or a story you have heard about places where hermits dwell.

‘On its own, this cave is neither big nor small. It is just as it is.

‘Then, you saw the bats as a risk of catching a disease. Do you know what the Europeans once saw in these bat droppings? A fortune; a fertilizer for their depleted soils which no longer bore food.

‘But do you know what Buddha’s disciples saw in those bats? Sentient beings, able to patiently listen and open up their souls to the words of the *Dhamma*—ready to join the *Sangha* in their next incarnation.

‘But on their own, these bats are just bats, and so is the excrement which they release.

‘Monks sometimes “catch” peace and deep meditation, and sometimes fall prey to weakness and pessimism.

‘Some monks develop deep insights, and then they go out and teach. Others withdraw into austerity, and permanently shun the outer world.

‘Yet you are bothered with the chance of catching some petty infection.

‘On their own, neither the cave, nor the bats in it, or your present circumstances, are identical to the images which you have created in your mind. You see them the way it seems most fit at the moment. You perceive them the only way you are capable of.

‘On their own, they are all empty. Understand this, and a bit of your mind will drop, too.’

That night neither the sound of my empty bowels, nor the ceaseless clapping of the bat wings disturbed my sleep. Such was my tiredness. Such was my acceptance.

.....

The next morning *bhikkhu* had a new lesson for me.

‘This time,’ he announced, ‘you will hand over your professor’s hat to me. Let us talk some simple algebra.’

He sounded resolute, gentle and funny, all at once. He would make for an extraordinary teacher, I thought. I had no choice but to accept his new methodology.

‘Let us talk about primes,’ he proposed.

‘A prime number?’ I was genuinely surprised.

‘Yes, a natural number that isn’t a product of two smaller natural numbers,’ he confirmed, and unexpectedly giggled.

‘I prefer to say that a prime is a number with exactly two factors.’

‘What’s the difference?’

‘The latter definition is far more elegant. Since only natural numbers are factorable, one no longer needs to emphasize the number set. This definition also excludes the number one, which is neither prime nor composite,’ I explained triumphantly. ‘Mathematicians deify elegance in statements and proofs.’

‘There is one problem with your elegance,’ *bhikkhu* replied. ‘It aims at simplicity, but lands in pedantry. And that hair-splitting gets in your line of vision.’

‘Do you then reject the ways of mathematics?’

‘Why would I reject something so pure, fundamental and exact as the system of mathematics? I was talking about your obsession with perfection at times when it is of no practical value.’

I wasn’t convinced by his argument but, before I got a chance to respond, he grabbed my cane hat and put it on his freshly tonsured head. ‘Remember our agreement,’ he said, ‘today, you will have to let me talk about math!’

‘I am sorry,’ I murmured, determined to stay quiet this time.

Bhikkhu smiled and patted me on the back. ‘Relax, Nagasena,’ he said. ‘I do not pretend to know more than I do. I will leave the talk about infiniteness of primes and abstract algebra to you and your classroom. In your world I am a novice, just like you are in mine. Sometimes, sharing a hat with a friend can bring something fruitful. Let me try to demonstrate this. You might like analogies from your area of interest.’

I was slightly ashamed of my arrogance. *Bhikkhu* saw my embarrassment, and quickly brushed it off by bringing the primes back.

‘I want to remind you of the man who devised a simple way of finding all the primes smaller than a given number (say, N). His name was Eratosthenes.’

Who hasn’t heard of Eratosthenes of Cyrene, I thought. An Ancient Greek polymath with taste for everything, from music to astronomy.

‘The method was named after him,’ *bhikkhu* continued. ‘It is known as *the Sieve of Eratosthenes*. So, in order to identify the primes, Eratosthenes wrote down all the integers from 2 to N. He then began sorting out all the numbers from that list.

‘Since 2 is indivisible, he accepted 2 as a prime, and kept it the list.

‘Now, any other number divisible by 2 is composite. Eratosthenes thus crossed out from the list all the even numbers.

‘He then looked for the first uncrossed number in the list, following 2. That would be 3, which is, of course, also prime.

‘Using the same reason as before, he then sieved out all the multiples of 3.

‘Looking back at the list, he found 5, since 4 was out as a multiple of 2. He then hopped, by 5 units at a time, all the way towards N. Every number he landed on was a multiple of 5, and thus, sieved through.

‘By repeating the loop of the algorithm, he produced the list of primes: 2, 3, 5, 7, 11,... Those were the numbers that had survived the scrutiny of the sieve.

‘But I am a Buddhist monk, not a mathematician. Then ask me, why would I talk of primes?’

I accepted his challenge. ‘Okay, so why do you talk about prime numbers with me?’ I asked.

‘Because just like Eratosthenes sifted all the non-primes through his sieve, you, too, can sort out all your dispositions and attachments. Many of your bents are nothing but different faces of the same multi-headed god or a demon who clutches your mind.

‘Your aim should be to identify that entity, that prime driver behind your delusional choices and pursuits. The moment you recognize it, an entire chain of desires, passions and obsessions will be griddled out through *Nagasena’s Sieve* as noting but mere repetitiveness, multiples of the same prime driver. It will be easy to drop them without any regret. Cluster all which you like and dislike, all your fears and dreams, everything

you are and everything others perceive you to be, and then start crossing out, one by one, all that is a replica of something that lies in the core of your ossified, musty identity.

‘Once you are done, come back. Even if I am no longer there, someone else will be. Show your primes to the Master, and he will help you toss out a few more among those too. He will chase away the squirrel from you, that poor little hoarder who thinks piling up brings security. The Master will throw away all that which you have amassed, until what remains is capable of showing you the futility and foolishness of everything.’

It all sounded like some Buddho-mathematical version of Maslov’s hierarchy of needs. Yet in spite of everything, *bhikkhu* was way better at dealing with math and psychoanalysis than I had ever been with the riddles of the Eastern mysticism schools.

‘And how do I actually sift through all my defilements?’ I asked.

‘Just sit still and breathe. Your attachments will keep coming back to you, disguised as innocent thoughts, like a playful flight of damselflies. If you remain alert, you will recognize them. Catch them by their tails. And then be ready for the storm.’

‘We call those defilements, those torments of the mind, *kleshas*. They go beyond attachments, and include greed, illusion, aversion, doubt and much more.’

Do you remember the formula that I showed you some time ago? It was a simplified version of the more truthful one:

$$Bliss = \frac{\text{number of selfless acts}}{\text{number of kleshas}}$$

A ratio of two cardinalities, I thought. A new type of duality.

‘Attachments are just one of the many clouds in that stormy sky. *Kleshas* are the storm in its totality—the mass of clouds that prevent you from seeing the sun.’

၁၁၁၁ *Pigeonholes and Hermits*

‘**E**verything that you think you know about time is wrong,’ he whispered in my ear. I was convinced he was just pretending not to see my distress. I was sweating profusely. The prolonged use of flip-flops had given me sore skin under the thongs and an acute heel pain that threatened to turn debilitating. I was still learning to feel comfortable in my new monk robe—my exposed right shoulder had suffered a severe sunburn, and even the slightest brush of the cloth was painful. I was dehydrated in spite of drinking a lot of water, and my body couldn’t adjust neither to the brutal climate nor to the rhythm imposed by my spry teacher.

‘I know what you are thinking right now,’ he said.

I remained calm. Not because I refused to accept that he knew me so well, but because I was somehow pulling together the last iotas of strength against the growing fatigue.

He smiled at my effort to conserve what was left of my vigor by remaining silent.

‘You are thinking that this is not the time to have a discourse,’ he carried on, ‘not as long as your feet are hurting, your skin is burning, and your head is throbbing. But this is a good time for such conversation. In fact’—he said following a brief pause—‘in your case, there couldn’t be any better.’

My face must have conveyed plain despair. We had already been waiting for an hour for our transportation to arrive, and no-one seemed to know if the wait would be worthwhile. The two of us—and at least forty other people—were sitting on the benches under a hangar-like construction, meant to serve as some kind of a bus station. Children ran around playfully, carrying plastic toy guns in one hand and ice-cream in the other. It appeared that no-one else but me bothered about the heat and the wait—everybody either ate something, talked and laughed, or simply relaxed on the floor, as if they had already reached their destination.

‘In some way, it is not your fault you’ve been living this way,’ *bhikkhu* said, making fun of my face expression. ‘You have been told how to lead a life of material success and prosperity. So, you pigeonhole everything you do.’

Here it comes again, another one of his metaphors, I thought.

‘I don’t think I understand,’ I said.

‘You bracket time. You feel in control only when you see a tangible outcome of the time spent today—and you are conditioned to assign a present or future value to that outcome,’ he replied. ‘*Time well spent*, isn’t it what you always heard? You must have been told by your parents and teachers that this was the right way to lead a productive life.’

I was ready to listen. In all honesty, *bhikkhu* was an unconventional talker, and for that, I held him in high regard. He always spoke on his own accord, and it was nearly impossible to predict both his periods of silence and lively conversation.

‘You went to schools, and read books, and studied for exams—and the time you spent doing all that seemed meaningful. You knew you would get your degree, and your degree would bring you a step closer to a good job, and the good job would, in return, bring you money, stability and reputation. So you never questioned the value of the time dedicated to those scholarly affairs.

‘You then spent time on things that brought sensory pleasure. You goofed around with your friends, romanced with your woman, went on vacations, ate good food, and engaged in a few hobbies. As long as it remained moderate and didn’t hinder the progress on your other gainful activities, you allowed yourself to have some fun. Thus you are convinced that the time spent in leisure was also justified.

‘You do not question the time spent on things and activities, as long as they are deemed academic, professional, cultural, healthy, pleasurable, lucrative, charitable, honorable, and so on. I have just named the pigeonholes on the timeline of your life. Some are

large and adorned; others are so tiny, that only a stunted bird would fit in. But does it really matter? They are nothing but hollows that swallow your time.

‘In spite of that, you are so thriftless with your time. You keep hopping from one pigeonhole to another.

‘But let me tell you one more thing. Right now and right here, while you are waiting for that truck to arrive, and while you are half-heartedly listening to an old monk out of mere seemliness, you are letting time slip through the crevices of your experience. You feel angry and restless. You let the lumps on your feet and the blisters on your skin define your present focus. Are they all there is to this day?

‘Do you think this moment—spent doing nothing—is totally worthless? You let it go so easily, as if it belonged to someone else and not to you.

‘How many of these moments have you lost and are still ready to lose, taking up a life of a pigeon breeder?

‘Yet, not even all the pigeonholes of your world, taken all at once, have consumed as much time as the time cumulatively lost in those in-between moments, which you so foolishly discard as trifle.’

I understood him very well.

When I look at my past, I see thick clusters of time tied to particular memories of people, events and moods; but they cannot cover the great vastness that my life has been. So many moments, seemingly no more significant than these particles of dust under my flip-flops, have filled the space around those memories. Yet I have let them slip through. They are gone forever, underrated and unattended.

Time is both salient and elusive—it is the fine fibre of our existence and identity. And I am wasting a hell lot of it, doing one of two things. I either keep feeding those birds of gluttony, or I keep overlooking everything that lies in-between those pigeonholes—moments after moments after moments of real life, ridiculous life, my life.

Of all those pigeons, only a few are mine; yet even a loner like me ends up feeding more than he can handle.

On the one hand, ambitions prick us like diamonds laid in a dark cave.

On the other hand, we are given a finite lifespan—one that has room for just a few of them.

Dirichlet was right—there is always one pigeon too many¹¹².

Bhikkhu said I should stop breeding those birds and start living outside those holes.

Life flows in a *continuum*. The eternity, that *infinity* which I try so hard to grasp, is not of the *countable* type.

Consciousness is a *continuum*.

I cried. Tears are never made of just one bit. In those tears, my burnt skin and my bruised feet and my throbbing head and divided heart—they all found their place. In them, there stood a forty-two year old man, well past the onset of a midlife crisis, whom I was somehow learning to accept. A mediocre mathematician. *Sikandar* without his laurels. A soppy Buddhist novice, not even capable of a dignified monkhood. Perhaps the first monk ever seen crying.

Bhikkhu kept smiling. He did not laugh at my tears. Neither did he try to comfort. He silently witnessed my ridiculous melange of weakness, awareness and sentimentality.

When I finally managed to look at him, he said one thing.

‘You can waste all the time in this world, and yet it wouldn’t matter—because in a mere instant of awakened consciousness, you will experience eternity.

‘That is why an intelligent monk strives to remain mindful in all his activities—chant, meditation, mundane chores, service to the community. He learns how to remain open, and he awaits that moment of a Buddha-like awareness.’

I nodded silently.

‘Now, let us go,’ he said. ‘Our truck is here.’

He wanted me to see a rock, a boulder high up in the mountains and in the middle of nowhere, adorned with gold and adored by millions. He said a pilgrimage was complete only if it offered a foretaste of the miraculous, and that the place we were headed to had a spiritual vibe like no other. I believed him. He spoke to that dying child in me, still capable of believing in miracles.

What a ride it was! We hopped on an open-roof truck (all forty-something of us) and sat side by side on the metal seats of the strangest passenger vehicle I had ever seen. We travelled for thirty or forty minutes up the precipitous serpentine road through the jungle, with a speed so terrifying, that only a driver certain of his *karmic* merits could dare even try. The journey was nothing short of a roller coaster for pilgrims, and *bhikkhu* surely knew how to enjoy it. He giggled throughout the entire ride. I still remember the sound of the screeching tires laced with his laughter, and the end of his burgundy-color robe wavering in the air.

Once we reached the top of the hill and dismounted our dizzy selves from that awesome vehicle, we walked for another fifteen minutes up a linear street crammed with monks, Buddhist laymen and other wayfarers, bearers of palanquins and large wooden baskets, hawkers and tour guides. *Bhikkhu* was overjoyed like a small child.

I finally recognized that object of holiness, a large golden boulder suspended from the edge of a cliff, an aerial wonder and a gravity denier. Its gold-covered surface glistened, brushed by the rays of the descending sun. As the wind blew, hundreds of small metal bells fastened on the fences around us swayed, and their chiming sound mixed with the humming of chants and prayers. Pilgrims kept gilding the rock with fresh layers of gold foil, and around them a swarm of small, square-shaped pieces of bamboo paper carrying gold-leaf residue flickered in the air like confetti. Under the boulder—an abyss. Around it—magnificent hills, covered in misty clouds and dense forest, stretching beyond the reach of the eye.

As the night began to descend, in the lower courtyard built under the rock, plenty of oil lamps, candles and incense sticks got lit. The air quickly filled with tear-shaped clusters of flame and swirling trails of smoke. On the faces of the devotees, illuminated by the fleeting light, I saw peace and steadiness.

That night we slept on the tiled terrace in the *pagoda* complex, under the open sky. *Bhikkhu* did not talk much but insisted that, while monasteries were plenty, there was only one Kyaiktiyo. He said that no pillow would offer more comfort than the sight of a single strand of Buddha's hair, capable of holding back an entire rock from bowling down and falling to pieces.

That night *bhikkhu* and I slept under the open sky, over straw mats shared with us by a family of eight. It is hard to describe the magic of that night—I felt as if the whole existence finally embraced me and lulled me into peaceful rest. Long after I closed my eyes, the sound of flickering flames, tinkling bells and faint chanting still remained.

At four in the morning, long before the first rays of the Sun appeared, *bhikkhu* shook my shoulders saying it was time to wake up. We walked downhill, toward the main gate of the *pagoda* compound, and we lined up in a single file with fifty-or-so other monks. It was time to collect the morning alms. I wrapped my arm around the *thabeik*¹¹³ and lowered my gaze, letting people acquire *kútho*¹¹⁴ by donating food to one more monk.

The morning was fresh and quiet. A quaint sight captured my attention. Some different kind of monks stood in front of me, laying a claim on the entire street. Grey-bearded and dressed in deep burgundy-colored robes, they wore strangely big, vase-shaped black and brown hats. About thirty centimeters tall, those leather (and a few among them lacquered, too) hats were as far out as the men underneath.

How to even begin to describe the shape of that hat? To the European eye, it looks like a bottle vase, a Greek amphora without its handles, or maybe an ole vase—wide at its bottom, tapered around one-third from the top. To the Asian eye, it probably looks like a Chinese *phoenix-tail* or a *yen-yen* vase.

The monks looked nothing like me. They wore large, wooden beads in a peculiar way; folded twice, the long string of beads coiled over the left shoulder and went under the right armpit. A scarf-like piece of cloth was tied around in exactly the same manner. I noticed black tattoos on one of the monk's arms, but did not get a chance to get closer and examine the details of the drawing. Their scalps were not tonsured, and quite a few among them displayed long hairs and quirky scant goatee beards. A couple of older monks leaned onto a cane, almost black in color, with a stripe or two in blue or red. Others walked slowly, balancing a carrying pole, with bamboo baskets or black alms bowls suspended from each end of the yoke. Like human metronomes, each stopped at a constant interval and hammered a brass *kyeezee* bell which dangled on a cord tightened on the yoke. The mystics gazed at some imaginary point, not too far from their position of temporary stillness.

Bhikkhu told me that those were the hermits of the Golden Rock, the ascetic Buddhist anchorites, also known as the *yathei*. The legend says that Buddha once gave six strands of his hair to three hermits. Accepting them as sacred relics, each of the hermits took special care of the gift. One of them, by the name of Taik Tha, carried the relics on the top of his head, safeguarding them inside his own topknot. In fact, the name of the place, Kyaik-hti-yo, means *the shrine carried on hermit's head* (this finally explained the strange shape of the *yathei* hat; symbolically, the hermit carries a *pagoda* on his head). Before he died, Taik Tha agreed to enshrine the relics within a boulder of the shape of his own head. Thagyamin, the King of the *nats*, found such a boulder on the bottom of the ocean and placed it on the hill where the hermit resided. It is the spiritual power of the relics that kept the boulder balance on the rock. That was the origin of Kyaiktiyo.

The world of the *yathei* monks is a most unusual one. Focused on the meditative rather than the ritual aspect of Buddhism, the *yathei* monks find freedom in a solitary form of spiritual search. They often disappear from the eyes of the world, wandering the mountains and the deep forests. They usually do not belong to a particular monastic community, but can often be seen in the proximity of the *weikzas*, the Burmese masters

of the esoteric and magical, such as Bo Bo Zin, the uncanny anchorite of Mount Popa. The *yathei* monks search for the miraculous at the margins of the customary, and if there was a single place on earth that manifested such mystery, *bhikkhu* said, it had to be Kyaiktiyo.

Nobody (apart from the hermits themselves) fully understands the lifestyle of a *yathei* monk. In no other case it is more accurate to say that, in order to understand a *yathei*, one has to become a *yathei* himself. There are oriental chronicles, of course, as well as oral traditions, which describe the *yathei* as being a radical hermit, one who willingly succumbs to the ostracism from the organized forms of Buddhism, and from the society at large. He practices silence and cannot regularly depend on alms, since he typically dwells in solitude and rarely walks into human settlements. His are the caves, and his are the herbs, roots and fruits of the hills and the forests. He might even show hostility towards an unwanted attention from a random passerby.

I couldn't move my eyes away from them. There was such magnetism in their silent presence, that I was one step away from leaving *bhikkhu* behind and following one of them. I thought they carried Kyaiktiyo within—its inscrutable, arcane essence. They were Kyaiktiyo, and Kyaiktiyo was them. But I didn't go. I couldn't go. I rationalized my hesitation by evoking their reputation of being cross towards intruders. The truth, as always, belonged at the other end of the spectrum of my manipulative ego. It was I who was scared of looking at life so directly, so daringly. I wasn't ready yet for such a feral path to spirituality. That truth was in no way flattering.

Bhikkhu saw the enchantment in my eyes. He also saw my weakness, my hesitation, the paradox of my clinging to the world of known all the while hungering for the realm of the mystical.

'Think of a number,' he said. 'Multiply it by 2. Add 6. Divide by 2. Subtract the original number. I bet you got 3!'

‘Did you just reduce my math aptitude to the level of a seven-year old?’ I asked, not able to process *bhikkhu*’s sudden need to entertain me with clichéd math riddles.

‘Oh, so now you feel offended,’ he calmly replied. ‘But you shouldn’t be. You are still a child in a body of a grown up man.’

‘What makes you think so?’ I asked.

‘As a Doctor of Mathematics, you easily dismissed my math magic as trivial arithmetics. But as far as your spiritual maturity goes, you are still a child. Everything on this path has capacity to amaze you and puzzle you. Today you got sidetracked by the secretive aura of a hermit, tomorrow you’ll get sidetracked by the seductive confidence of some *hsaya*¹¹⁵.

‘We say that magic is *lokiya*, worldly knowledge. On the other hand, those scripts that you found at Kuthodaw Paya represent *lokuttara*, the other-worldly knowledge of *nibanna*.

You keep searching for more knowledge, and I keep telling you that all you will ever need is already yours. The hermits know that, and all intelligent *hsayas* like Bo Bo Zin know it, too. It is about time that you also understood.

Focus on your breath—every moment of every day—and you will not long for any other magic ever again.’

That morning, the meritorious pilgrims fed us rice, fish and fruits.

အဋ္ဌမ *Matryoshka Monk*

Construct a dhamma ceti¹¹⁶ within your own heart.

Sayadaw U Pandita

‘How much gold is too much?’ I asked *bhikkhu*, as we watched the new wave of pilgrims rub gold leaves on the rock.

‘Did you ever pose that question to a rich man?’ he asked back.

‘I don’t need to,’ I said. ‘I think I have understood the reasons why the worldly man keeps heaping money and gold.’

‘Then, doesn’t it make perfect sense for the believer to do the exact opposite—to share instead of pile up?’

He tried to trap me, again. But I wasn’t ready to give up just yet. In those couple of weeks of traveling across his country of glittering *pagodas*, *bhikkhu* had shown me the supremacy of gold amidst the holiest of places.

I saw so many statues of Buddha plastered over with layer upon layer of gold foil. Sometimes the amount of the precious metal accumulated over the years went so massive, that the statue completely changed its original appearance; Buddha’s face transformed, often his entire anatomy too, and only chronological photo records, meticulously maintained by the Buddhist clergy, testified to the image concealed under the layers of the precious surface.

I heard stories of emeralds, rubies and other gems cached in the belly of a large Buddha statue, under a-few-hundred-kilos-heavy and a fifteen-centimeter-thick layer of gold regalia. I saw a wish-fulfilling statue remolded under the weight of so much gold, that only Buddha’s large, bulging eyes and thick, chunky lips could be discerned.

Once, on the banks of a misty lake covered in purple hues of hyacinth flowers, in a village of one-legged fisherman who held large conical fishnets and dangled over the edges of their wooden boats with magic no less than that of the golden rock, I entered a *pagoda* of five famed Buddha figurines. To say they were completely covered in gold would be such an understatement—those images were morphed to such an extent, that they resembled golden blobs or stacked disks on the *Tower of Hanoi*.

So I repeated my question: ‘What is the purpose of so much gold?’

‘It is being placed where it truly belongs,’ he replied.

I, the one-time friend of the man who knew everything about symbols, did not have to be reminded of the purity, permanence and enlightenment associated with the gold. Golden was the skin color of the gods of the pyramids. Golden was the primordial womb and the cosmic egg in the Hindu creation myths. Transmuting iron into gold and a feeble man into a spiritual colossus was once a dream of every alchemist.

‘I know,’ I said. ‘Buddha’s statue, gilded in gold, stands for light, knowledge, wisdom, perfection, and immortality. Gilding the statue with gold foil brings spiritual merit to the devotee.’

‘All your questions have the same origin,’ he smiled. ‘And therefore my answers to them will eventually have to merge together.’

‘I still don’t get it,’ I surrendered.

‘Do you remember when you asked me why we needed so many Buddhas?’ he called to mind one of our recent conversations.

‘You never replied to that either,’ I said. ‘I thought you had rejected it as a foolish question.’

‘It wasn’t the right time,’ he replied. ‘I believe it is now.’

My earlier question had been provoked by our visit to an ancient city of two-thousand *pagodas*, to a village of two-thousand *stupas*, to a cave of eight-thousand statues, and a

temple covered in half-a-million images of Buddha. I heard that some foreign tourists, overwhelmed by the never-ending series of images of golden Buddhas everywhere, coined the terms *Buddha fatigue* and *Buddha overdose*. Undoubtedly, I did not like any of the phrases—I thought there could be no such thing as getting overdosed or fatigued from images of spiritual tranquility and bliss. Yet the question remained—what is the purpose of creating so many *Buddhas*?

Bhikkhu suddenly stood up and walked towards a group of people who had gathered nearby. He talked to a few among them, and after a short while he came back to me, accompanied by three elderly women and a teenage girl. From their colorful dresses and accessories I inferred they belonged to one of the hundred ethnic groups of Shan State, the region of high mountains, deep limestone caves and floating villages.

The girl was the only one among them who could speak English. *Bhikkhu* instructed her to be my translator.

‘Why should I reply to your questions,’ he said, ‘when others may be able to do it much better. Go ahead, ask these three simple, unschooled and naturally intelligent women, whatever you want to know.’

I hurriedly stood up and made a slight bow as a form of greeting and a sign of respect. I had not anticipated *bhikkhu*’s move—after all, I had this preconception that monks were not to engage in conversations with women. Yet this was a public place, and the conversation was about faith. It was so ridiculous of me to question the appropriateness.

When I failed to muster courage to address the women, *bhikkhu* did it on my behalf. ‘He wants to know,’ he told the girl, ‘why we have millions of Buddha statues everywhere. He wonders why one statue wouldn’t be enough. He is a newly ordained monk and he asks many questions,’ he added. ‘Can you ask your devout aunts what answer they would give?’

Unless the women spoke some indigenous language or a dialect, I thought, *bhikkhu* could have talked to them in his own language. But in that case I would not have understood their conversation, and the experience would not have been as embarrassing and humbling, as he wanted it to be.

Contrary to what I thought—I expected the ladies to laugh at my publicly proclaimed ignorance—they came across as calm and patient. They listened with great attention as the girl interpreted my question, and after a very brief exchange among themselves, they took turns speaking. The girl translated simultaneously.

‘We bow to the triple gem—*Buddha*, the enlightened one, *Dhamma*, his teachings, and the *Sangha*, the monks,’ one of them said. ‘Putting gold leaf on a Buddha image brings merit. Buddha is not a god, he is a human,’ she continued. ‘We do not pray to the man. When we chant and when we tell our beads, we venerate the enlightenment, the compassion and that freedom that we see in Buddha. We pray so that one day we, too, can awake. We bow to the *buddha* is each of us.

‘One man rose above the ocean of suffering, while millions of others didn’t. In our Buddhist faith, we embrace the image of that perfect human. We try to empty our mind from the greed of a million desires. We imagine a world with a million enlightened people. Every Buddha statue reminds us of that goal.’

Then the second woman spoke.

‘Not every image of Buddha looks the same. Do you see the difference among them?’ she asked. ‘Some are over a hundred meters tall, others are smaller than the pupil of the eye. Buddha’s hands are sometimes closed in prayer, or they touch the earth, and sometimes they simply rest in meditation. You can see Buddha standing, as he gives a sermon to his followers, or you can find him sit in meditation. There is also a lying Buddha, as he attains *parinibbāna*¹¹⁷. Some statues show Buddha cutting his hair on his way out from the royal palace. Other show the snails which covered his shaved head to protect him from the scorching sun. At times, Buddha is cushioned by a giant snake. At

others, he tames an elephant. Each statue teaches a different lesson, and helps us focus on another part of the Buddha nature.'

In a world of a million distractions, to have a million images of Buddha is a blessing, I thought. To a world of a million troubles, why not respond with a million faces of The Awakened One?

Bhikkhu carefully observed my face as I listened to the women. 'The foreign monk also wants to know why we put so much gold on the images of Buddha,' he added.

The third woman stepped forward, and gave the following reply.

'Is there such a thing as too much admiration, or too much love? When you appreciate something, you do it entirely. When you love someone, you give all that you have—and if you could, you would have given even more,' she said.

She was silent for a few moments, and then she said one last thing.

'A statue can be made of clay, marble, brass, iron, silver or gold. The statue is not Buddha. But neither did Buddha identify with his body.

'When we see an image of Buddha, we are reminded of Buddha's words. We remember that the earth, the stone, the metal and even the jewels in our lives are here today and gone tomorrow.'

Bhikkhu and I thanked the women and the girl, and let them continue their journey. As they were leaving, each of them shared some alms—potato with sticky rice, home-made sweets and a few pieces of fruit. It occurred to me that this should have been reversed. I, as a rookie member of the *Sangha* community, had been unable to offer any spiritual support to those women. I should be the one to thank them for their words and patience.

It would be only right to mention that, in the night following the conversation, those women appeared, once again, in my dream. I saw them as counterparts of the three

Biblical Magi, except that they hadn't come to greet the birth of a spiritual king, but to dispel the ignorance of a foolish Buddhist neophyte.

'So, what did you understand?,' *bhikkhu* asked, once we were alone again.

'I understood that a Buddhist statue is not a tribute to a god,' I said. 'It is an expression of the faith in the human potential to evolve. Those statues are a form of regard for the man who, twenty-five centuries ago, renounced the ways of the world in search of truth. Therefore, I should not look at these statues as if I were looking at a typical object of worship. These images celebrate the triumph of the human consciousness over the limitations of this material existence. They are a tribute to the possibility of attaining liberation from ignorance and sorrow,' I said.

'Did you learn anything more than that?' he poked.

'Yes, I understood I should stop asking stupid questions. And I should meditate a lot more.'

The Shan women also helped me ponder the significance of some of the most unusual images of Buddha which *bhikkhu* had shown me during our many wanderings.

In the plains of the ancient city of Bagan, we once stood in front of a forty-foot-tall statue of Buddha. The statue was confined to a space so small, that I almost touched Buddha's enormous fingers as I tried to complete a full circle around it. The claustrophobic *pagoda*, I was told, had been built to mimic the feelings of a great king held in captivity.

I could so easily relate to the angst of the confined king. My small world never really felt fit to my bones. But the day I outgrew it, I did not know how (or had no courage to) break through its ceiling and walls, and finally be free. Instead, I kept trying to adjust, trying to fit in. Eventually, my need to be accepted turned me into a cripple.

Yes, there is a giant within each of us, capable of greatness. The mind keeps him deeply asleep in his dreary world of illusions, so that he could somehow bear the squeezing

and pressing of this limited reality. He remains a prisoner of that ignorance until the flame gets lit, and the urge to be free outdoes all fears.

In the valleys of central Burma, we once walked through a village known for its never-ending yellow fields of sunflowers, and for a peculiar annual dance performed by men disguised as elephants. For centuries, the village kept hidden a very special statue, a unique gem of Buddhist contemplation. Only recently, I was told, an old temple was excavated, and within it, a beautiful statue of Buddha was found.

They call it a three-layered Buddha, because it comprises of three statues, nested one into another. Unlike the Russian *Matryoshka doll*, the layers of the Burmese statue are not entirely hidden within one another. Each layer has openings large enough, so that the three Buddhas can be seen all at once.

Some people claim the age of each layer could be different and that, just like a new temple is sometimes built on the foundations of an older one, the outer layers of Buddha could have been intentionally created to encase the older, valuable relics. To me, none of this—even if true—was of much value. In my dream, the wise lady from the Shan Hills gave a much deeper interpretation of this special statue. ‘Look inside you, and find a Buddha *there*. Awaken him,’ she said. ‘And if you still cannot find him, look deeper.’

The three-layered Buddha was, indeed, an invitation to search for Light, for that wide open lotus deep within, and give up the idea of finding answers outside, in this touch-and-go world. Or maybe it was all about *bhikkhu*’s method of searching for the primes, and then removing them one by one, like layers of a large onion, until we are left with nothing but emptiness.

Two decades ago, when Sybil’s love for me was all I needed to feel like an accomplished man, I discovered that under its coarse brown husk, the chestnut contained one more layer. It needed to be peeled, before the sweet kernel could be savored. That inner skin was thin, soft and almost invisible; yet, it made the raw chestnut so bitter.

I know that the so-called spiritual man is no different than a raw chestnut. His renouncement of all things shallow and material is like shedding of coarse skin, peeling of the first crass layer in search for inner light. The spiritual man appears soft, open and vulnerable, but watch out for his inner skin—so bitter and poisonous it is, made of a naked ego and bare haughtiness. That is the skin of spiritual accomplishment; a sense of being ahead of those who have not yet stepped on the path toward enlightenment.

To become like *bhikkhu*, I needed to strip myself off that *tannin*-laced skin of vanity and cynicism. And then I had to go one step further—to let my old self perish, to let it burn like a chestnut on a bed of coal, before my inner core could radiate its true scent. I must never forget the message of the three-layered Buddha.

And then there was this statue—my absolute favorite—of an open-eyed Buddha, cast in clay. I found it in one of the many caves of *The Mountain of Isolated Solitary Meditation*. The statue was old and worn out, and its once exquisite ornaments were all long gone. Its color was that of cinnabar, of red alluvium soil—the color of perishable life.

Buddha's eyes shined out of that transient shape. Made of marble, those eyes cast such a fresh and vibrant energy, that I could not take mine off them. The marble-eyed Buddha triggered in me an unfamiliar craving, a kind of a spiritual nostalgia for something I should have pursued long ago, instead of having wasted my years on things liable to rot.

Of course, I told *bhikkhu* none of that. He would have disapproved of my verbosity and he would have called me a half-baked poet. And then, he would have also concluded I was still a sour meditator.

၂၀၆ *From Infinity to Zero and Back*

‘**N**agasena,’ I heard the Master call me, and I was sure he was to chide me again. Instead, he said something I did not expect.

‘It may be time to close the circle,’ he said. ‘But in order to do that, let me ask you—do you still see the infinity symbol everywhere?’

He knew about my fascination with the lemniscate embedded in the Burmese script. I had told him about my meditation on the slab stones of Kuthodaw Pagoda. As of late, those letters, which I kept seeing written on the road signs, started to remind me of coiled hamadryads, the royal snakes of the East. It’s very likely that my mind played the trick, anchoring itself in my new identity and in my new name.

‘I did not bring you here to provide more food for your pigeons,’ *bhikkhu* said, pulling me out of my (still rather intellectual) musings. ‘It is time you truly began to understand emptiness. A layman keeps projecting the “I” onto the objects of the world. He who does not know, attributes meanings to that which is void of any. On their own, none of the things which you perceive and interpret is the way you see it.

‘I shall say it one more time—declutter yourself from all that garbage, till you become empty. Release those objects around you from all the trash your mind projects onto them. That emptiness will not be dull. That emptiness will be the most potent thing you have ever experienced.

‘It may seem counterintuitive to you, but sometimes the only way to see things as they really are, empty of your interpretations, is to be where things are so new and happen so fast, that your speculative mind has no time to catch up. Before you get a chance to start projecting, I push you into a state of mindfulness. It might bring some foretaste of that emptiness. This is one of the reasons I took you with me.’

I didn't understand then. Not that I didn't try hard; on the contrary, with all my heart and soul I yearned for a glimpse of that experience. Perhaps I was rationalizing too much. Maybe I was not ready yet. After all, I did not come to this land to become a recluse. If only I had read a few more books, if only I had studied Buddhism a bit longer before I joined the *Sangha*—then things might have been different. Nagasena would not have been such a fool.

'You saw infinity in the script on those marble slabs, but guess what—you failed to see the zeros!' Once again, *bhikkhu* surprised me. Of course, as he always did, he found a bough and a piece of grassless soil to illustrate his idea.

'Isn't your infinity sign made up of two zeros stuck together? Oddly, you never saw it that way. I remember, you even said some alphabets reminded you of half-lemniscates, but they never looked to you like zeros!

'For some reason, your mind remains preoccupied with infinity. But the Buddhist world knows that the only way to comprehend the infinite is to understand the emptiness first. There is no other way.

'Now, look carefully at your lemniscate.'

He drew a zero, and then another one, right next to it. Indeed, although it looked like a pair of goggles, or like an obese figure eight turned sideways, it was also a lemniscate.

'Concentrate on that tangent point of the two zeros,' he said. 'Look at the place where the circles merely touch, at that point of no length, breadth, nor depth. That mathematical dimensionless is much more interesting than the coil which surrounds it.

'Start from there, and then begin to slowly move along the loop of your infinity symbol.

'You start with the zero on the left, then you move along the zero on the right, but the curve always brings you to the center of the lemniscate, to that point of emptiness. It takes you away from a world of duality, to a world of one. Then from that one, towards emptiness. And once you comprehend that nothingness, you will slowly start to see its infinite possibilities.'

I spent the rest of the day and the night meditating on that point of nothingness. I do not know whether it brought me any closer to proper understanding; but when the next morning *bhikkhu* told me it was time for me to return to the monastery, I considered his decision a declaration of my failure.

I could not tell him how much I would miss him. How could I so openly admit that my whole being was clinging onto his company, onto his patience and onto his wisdom? A monk, even if only a novice, should not so openly stick to his attachments.

I did not have to say a word, for *bhikkhu* knew me so well; he understood me better than I had ever been able to understand myself. *See it often, it looks smaller; smell it often, it loses its scent*¹¹⁸, he said. ‘It is time we parted ways.’

Such a fragrant flower *bhikkhu* was. There was no way he could ever turn into a scentless *fire of the forest*. I was totally and unconditionally devoted to him. Yet I was to never see him again.

To what did I owe the blessings of his company and guidance? That, I will never know. I didn’t always appreciate the greatness of his approach. Our *drops of water* are now at an end. My *parami* and our *yezset* are now exhausted. I cannot rely on the giant anymore. I am on my own now.

‘So tell me now,’ he asked during our downhill ride, ‘did you get your answers? How much gold is too much? How many Buddha statues are too many?’

‘Does it really matter,’ I said, ‘when it is all together emptiness?’

For the first time ever, *bhikkhu* and I laughed together.

I was sure I had finally given a correct answer. Yet *bhikkhu* spoke again.

‘Buddha asked, “Are you a shepherd who counts another man’s sheep, never sharing the way?”

‘Nagasena—you, too, should ask yourself: are you a goldsmith, counting another man’s gold? Are you a sculptor, counting another man’s sculptures? When will you carve your

own Buddha from the fabric of your own being? When will you beat your own chunk of gold into a gold leaf of devotion? When will the right time come?’

.....

The body is merely the foam of a wave, the shadow of a shadow.

Life is like a dew drop on a blade of grass, disappearing with the first rays of the sun.

Just like shepherds driving cattle into the fields, old age and death will drive you before them.

Thus spoke Buddha.

Bhikkhu Ashin Mamaka never initiated me into *maraṇasati*¹¹⁹, the Buddhist graphic version of the Latin *memento mori*¹²⁰. It is said that in the early days of Buddha’s teaching, yellow was the color of the monk’s robes. Yellow, as opposite to green. A reminder of the grass turning dry, of the leaves falling from a tree. All new disciples had to practice meditation on death before they could get ordained. They meditated at cemetery grounds, in order to face and accept the perishability of the human body. There is a Buddhist story about *asubha bhāvanā*, a type of mindfulness technique which Buddha shared with his disciples. Its purpose was to curb the attachment towards sensual pleasures by contemplating on the ugliness and mortality of the flesh. According to the story, this ‘foulness meditation’ arose in monks such shame and disgust over the filth of their own bodies, that it led to a mass suicide. The *bhikkhus* saw death as certain, and thought of it as a way out of suffering, as a shortcut to attaining *nibbāna*¹²¹.

I do not know if some sort of repulsion towards the world, or some wrong understanding of Buddhist sorrow and emptiness prompted Sofia to embrace death. I can only be certain that her path will never become mine.

Liam wrote a long email to me. In it, he described his last days with Sofia. For some reason he felt I would be able to understand.

‘A woman can’t become a *buddha*, and you deserve nothing less than enlightenment,’ he shouted at her, the last time he saw her. To that, she smiled a smile of a goddess. ‘Not according to the *Lotus Sutra*,’ was her reply, referring to a Buddhist scripture adored by Western seekers for its egalitarian treatment of women and their potential for enlightenment. Liam felt it was too late to try and convince her otherwise; so he kept to himself the argument that her favorite discourse, upheld by the followers of *Mahayana*, is dismissed in the rigorous *Theravada*, the dogma of the elder monks, practiced in Burma. ‘Besides,’ Sofia said, ‘among Buddha’s disciples, there were so many extraordinary women.’

She must have felt much less than extraordinary, the day she decided to end her life.

I also received Vuk’s confession. He and Mia have found love in the most unusual of places. I am happy for them. Mia has run back towards life, and this fact fills my chest with peace. I remember her in my *karuna bhavana*¹²² prayers and meditation. May she find her own bliss amidst the transience of this world.

I have begun to peel off the layers of my identity, shedding them like an old snakeskin, or like the nested Buddha shells of that magnificent statue. I do the same to the people and things that come my way, each day getting a bit closer to that wonderful emptiness in both myself and in them. I let go of resentment. Alexander is no longer my name. It is therefore only right to erase the wrong names I have given to my past experiences, and to all of my past attachments.

A monk has no concern with a comb¹²³, and thus Nagasena has no longer a regard for the hopes of a foolish man.

The earth will be my abode. I can settle in the shade of an old *padauk* or a tamarind tree.

All I now need is my black lacquered alms bowl, my *badi*¹²⁴ beads, and a stone to rest my head on when I am not awake.

It can take a long time for Nagasena to molt completely, before the last fiber of Alexander is gone. Or maybe, under the right *kamma* and *dhamma*, an effortless dissolution may happen, in an instant of perfect mindfulness. Until then, I remain a disciple.

If this gallivant mind cannot easily be dropped, let it at least remain occupied in math musings. It gives me comfort, for I know mathematics is the purest science among them all. Maybe one day Vuk's ideal of bringing science and religion together will be realized. When that happens, I am sure, mathematics will lend its language to all parties involved.

'I will drop it all,' I said. 'Just like I did with my clothes, my beard, my hair, and my name. I will drop my ego, too. I will drop my ideas of happiness. I will drop all the gems from my fists.'

Bhikkhu knew the tale. I shared it with him during one of our pilgrimages. All the pebbles that kept getting stuck between my flip-flops and my feet reminded me of the king and his army of soldiers in the cave filled with precious stones.

Hearing my statement, *bhikkhu* smiled.

'Dropping the gems would not be wise,' he said. 'Instead, drop the worthless stones. A monk develops the ability to distinguish the worthy from the worthless, just like the layman effortlessly sets apart the beautiful lotus from the unsightly mud it grows from.'

'There is an old parable told by a great Buddhist *sayadaw*¹²⁵ who used to meditate in those caves of Monywa, the home of your marble-eyed *Buddha*.

'It tells of a man who had put a lot of effort into ascending a mountain full to the brim with jade, rubies, emeralds and all kinds of jewels. Instead of garnering those, he kept searching for a piece of flint stone for his tinderbox.'

'For the time being, you need not drop the gems. Just stop being a flint man,' said the Master. Those were his last words to me.

Last night I dreamt again. A *sāmaṇera*¹²⁶ tries not to dream; yet my path from unconscious dreaming to (occasional) lucid dreams to a state of no dream is still incomplete. But I cherish this dream, last night's dream, as it was different. It was a vision at the intersection of math and religion. It is my final answer to anyone who might ask why, in this eclectic world of spirituality, I found this particular path to be most fitting.

My dream was red. Such is the color of this land. Here, every sunrise and each sunset contains a stroke of that red. In this new homeland, red is the color of the ignorant, of the *fire of the forest* man. But red is also the color of *canna*,¹²⁷ the flower which, centuries ago, sprung from Buddha's blood. Red are the fumes of mercury and cinnabar mixed in the *zawgyi* workshop. Red is the color of the great ruby rocks on which *Mount Meru*¹²⁸ rests. Millions of destitute people, stuck in the vicissitudes of the mundane, dream about the pigeon-blood jewels from the mines that could forever change their destitute lives.

They say that a learned man's blood has the color of a precious ruby. My true wealth are the days I spent in the company of such a ruby-man. Bhikkhu Ashin Mamaka changed the color of my sky.

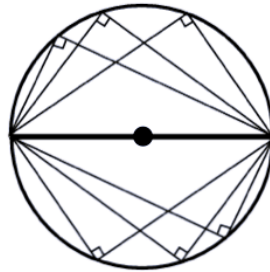
These are my last words. The day I started writing my diary, I took a vow that its completion would be a beginning of my retreat into silence.

During my first week in Burma, I once sat with a *baydin saya*¹²⁹, an astrologer and a palmist whom I found in the arcade of Mahamuni Pagoda. He collected my birth details, and looked into my palms with a large convex lens and a pair of widened eyes. He then picked up a *parabaik*¹³⁰ manuscript from an exquisitely carved, antique looking *sadaik*¹³¹ box laid in the corner of his shop. In my birth-chart he saw two arm fractures, enough money, but also a complete absence of joy. He said I was a man of the mind.

Before I finally drop that mind, there is one thing left for me to say.

There is a simple yet very important fact in geometry, known as the *Theorem of Thales*. It is believed that, long before the writings of the ancient Greek genius, the mathematicians of the East already knew of this mathematical fact.

The theorem states that every inscribed angle over a circle's diameter is right.



Buddha is my center, my inner light.

The noble way of *Dhamma*—the Universal Law—is now my path, the diameter of my existence.

The *Sangha* is my circle. As long as I am a part of it, my view, my intention, my speech, my action, my livelihood, my effort, my mindfulness and my concentration¹³² will remain right.

And then one day, maybe, I will finally be able to discern real gems from a heap of flint stones. As an old Burmese saying goes, if a ruby is genuine, then neither fire can scorch it nor mud can sink it. I am ready to spend the rest of this life in a search of a genuine ruby.

PART $\frac{2}{0}$: THE END (OR A NEW BEGINNING)

∞ : *A Chapter of Infinite Possibilities*

Maybe you truly despise mathematics, passionately and viscerally, and to such an extent that no story, irrespective of its origin or reach, could justify the mention of it. Yet you have reached, all the way through the pages of this book, to its very end.

Or maybe you are an old-school, square-toed zealot, and you respect mathematics so much, that you consider any mention of it outside the frame of accuracy and rigor worthy of nothing but disdain. And yet you are still holding this book in your hands.

A math analphabet or a prodigy, a lover or a hater, a giver or a taker—I am glad to see that you have arrived here. This book is for you. It belongs to you.

I am no longer a talker. I will only say that all the gates should be broken. Walk through them, if that is what your inner voice is whispering or shouting. Kill the gatekeepers who tell you what's fit and what isn't for you.

Pick up the clues on your path, in whatever language, tradition or form they come. Let them shape you, let them guide you, let them take you to the best of your infinite possibilities.

ENDNOTES

¹ Hindi: Slum area with poorly constructed huts/houses made of sheets of corrugated iron and mud

² Hindi: Indian fig tree, cluster fig tree

³ Hindi: Rickshaw drivers

⁴ Hindi: Washer(wo)men

⁵ Hindi: Sweepers, cleaners

⁶ Hindi: Paan (betel leaves) sellers

⁷ Hindi: Blacksmiths

⁸ Hindi: Wheat flour

⁹ Hindi: Potters

¹⁰ A Hindi equivalent of the saying '*Jack of all trades, master of none*'

¹¹ Hindi: Sandals

¹² Hindi: Milkmen

¹³ Hindi: Butchers

¹⁴ Hindi: Masons

¹⁵ Hindi: Tailors

¹⁶ Hindi: Hairdressers

¹⁷ Hindi: Gardeners

¹⁸ *Roti* (Hindi): Indian flatbread made of wholewheat and without yeast. *Daal* (Hindi): pulses/lentils; here it stands for a popular, basic lentils meal (soup). *Daal* is typically eaten with *rotis*.

¹⁹ Popular Indian sweets made of batter, which after being deep-fried, is soaked in sugar syrup

²⁰ A vernacular Hindi expression for finding a quick, improvised and low-cost solution to a problem, by bending rules and common practices, or by engaging in frugal innovation.

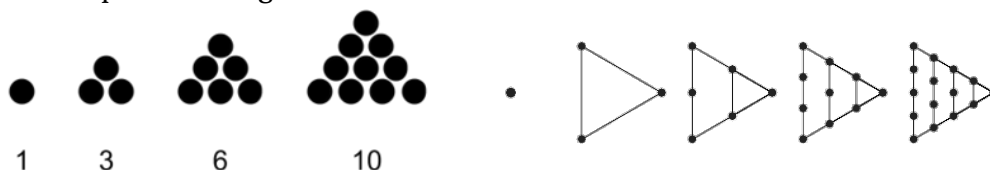
²¹ *Parampara*, or guru (teacher)–*shishya* (disciple) tradition is present in *Hinduism*, *Jainism*, *Sikhism* and *Buddhism*. It represents a historical line of practitioners who pass down spiritual wisdom, knowledge, and techniques (in one word: heritage) from one generation to another, thus giving legitimacy to a particular school or a system.

²² The volume of a cone is one-third that of a cylinder with same base radius, i.e.

$$V_{\text{cone}} = \frac{1}{3}\pi r^2 h = \frac{1}{3}V_{\text{cylinder}}$$

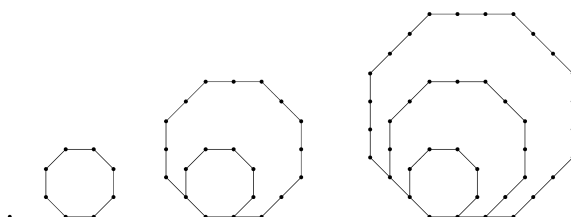
²³ The *h*-index (Hirsch index) is a popular metric used to measure a scholar's accomplishments, both in terms of number of publications and number of citations. An *h*-index equal to *n* means having published *n* papers, each of which cited at least *n* times.

²⁴ A number is triangular if it is a sum of the first n natural numbers. The smallest triangular number is 1, the second triangular number is 3 ($1+2$), the third triangular number is 6 ($1+2+3$), the fourth triangular number is 10 ($1+2+3+4$), and so on. Twenty-one is a triangular number since it is a sum of the first six natural numbers ($1+2+3+4+5+6$). The reason behind the name given to these numbers is geometric: every triangular number can be represented by dots arranged in a shape of a triangle.



Notice how each triangle can be obtained from the previous one by extending two of its adjacent sides by one unit each.

²⁵ A number is called octagonal if it can be visualized as a collection of dots arranged in a shape of an octagon (an eight-sided polygon). The first several octagonal numbers are 1, 8, 21, 40, and their geometric representation is as follows:

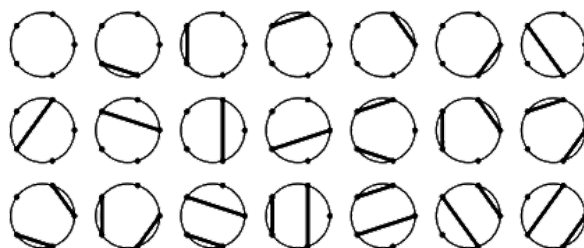


Just like in the case of triangular numbers, any of the octagons can be obtained from the previous by extending two of its adjacent sides by one unit each.

²⁶ A Fibonacci number is an element of the following sequence of numbers: 1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, 21, 34,...Each number in the sequence is equal to the sum of the preceding two numbers. For instance, $21=8+13$.

²⁷ *Harshad*, or ‘joy-giving’ numbers owe their name to two *Sanskrit* words: *harṣa* (joy) + *da* (give). A *Harshad* number (in a given base) is divisible by the sum of its digits (in the same base). Since in daily life we use the decimal system (base 10), in this base the number 21 is a *Harshad* number—it is divisible by the sum of its digits ($2+1=3$).

²⁸ Draw a circle and choose several points that lie on that circle (suppose n). A *Motzkin* number for n is the number of different ways in which you can draw non-intersecting chords between these n points. If we choose 5 points on the circle, then there are 21 ways in which we can draw non-intersecting chords between these 5 points. Of course, some of the points remain unconnected. Therefore, 21 belongs to the list of *Motzkin* numbers.

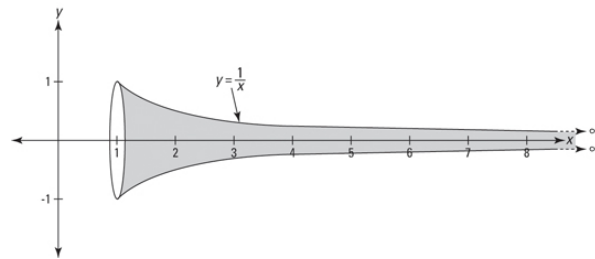


²⁹ German: ‘Do not get angry, man’; one of the most popular board games, often compared to the English game *Ludo* and to the Indian *Pachisi*.

³⁰ According to various esoteric schools and occult traditions, the *incubus* (male) and the *succubus* (female) are carnal demons who target and torment sleepers, feeding on the sexual fantasies of their prey.

³¹ In Abrahamic religious traditions, Angel Gabriel blows through his horn on the Judgement Day. Mathematically, there is a solid (a three-dimensional object) named after Gabriel’s horn. This solid is obtained by rotating the curve $y=1/x$ around the x -axis, by considering the x values from 1 to infinity.

The solid obtained resembles a trumpet:



The interesting fact about this solid is that it has finite volume, and to prove this, we need (just a little bit of) calculus:

$$V = \pi \int_1^{\infty} f(x)^2 dx = \pi \int_1^{\infty} \left(\frac{1}{x}\right)^2 dx = \pi \left(-\frac{1}{x}\right) \Big|_1^{\infty} = \frac{\pi}{x} \Big|_1^{\infty} = \frac{\pi}{1} - \frac{\pi}{\infty} = \pi - 0 = \pi$$

³² Thomson’s lamp paradox, named after the philosopher James F. Thomson, proposes the following puzzle: Imagine a lamp with a manual switch button. Each time the switch is pressed, the lamp goes on or off. Suppose we turn the lamp on. After a minute, we turn it off. Then after half a minute we turn it on again, and after a quarter of minute, we switch it off again. If some super-being is able to perform this task with the required speed, the question is: after exactly two minutes, will the lamp be on or off?

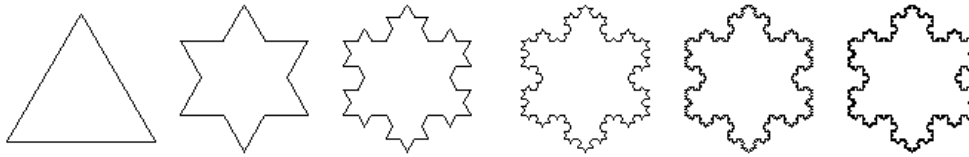
This is a paradoxical question since, in order to complete two minutes, the switch will need to be pressed infinitely many times:

$$1 + \frac{1}{2} + \frac{1}{4} + \frac{1}{8} + \frac{1}{16} + \dots = 2$$

Since there are infinitely many steps in this series, it is impossible to say whether the order of the last switch will be odd or even, and consequently, if the lamp would be on or off at the end of the second minute.

³³ A tripod is the most stable of all chairs, for a simple fact: any three non-collinear points are always coplanar (they lie in the same plane). The tips of the three legs of the tripod chair can be considered as three points. Those three points define a plane. On the other hand, either due to a lack of craftsmanship or due to an uneven surface upon which the chair is placed, a four-legged chair may not always be stable, as four points are not necessarily coplanar.

³⁴ The *Koch snowflake* is a mathematical fractal (repetitive curve, a pattern that is applied in infinitely many steps). Its step-by-step creation is illustrated below:



³⁵ Georg Cantor was born in 1845 and died in 1918. All references to cardinal numbers and related paradoxes such as Thomson's Lamp Paradox were developed after Cantor.

³⁶ Acronym for the following group of academic disciplines: Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics

³⁷ In *Hinduism*, *puja* is a religious, ritualistic worship, while *yagna* is a ritualistic offering

³⁸ *Darshan* (from *Sanskrit*: *darshana*, 'sight'): to behold, to see a holy person, a deity, or a sacred object

³⁹ *Vastu Shastra* is traditional Indian knowledge of bringing wellbeing and prosperity through sacral geometry of the living space (architecture and interior design which enhances abundance through proper placement of objects within a house)

⁴⁰ *Bharatanatyam* is a classical South Indian dance, with sacred elements and significance

⁴¹ *Bhajan* is a devotional song in *Hinduism*

⁴² In *Hinduism*, *prasad* is an offering made at a temple. It typically consists of food and/or flowers. It is a common practice for *gurus*/masters to distribute *prasad* to their devotees and followers. It is believed that the *prasad* received from a *guru* is imbued with spiritual qualities and blessings.

⁴³ *Ayurvedic medicine* (*Ayurveda*) is a traditional Indian system of medicine.

⁴⁴ *Shiva* ('The Destroyer') is one of the principle gods of *Hinduism*. Along with *Brahma* ('The Creator') and *Vishnu* ('The Preserver'), he belongs to the *Hindu* trinity.

⁴⁵ In the spiritual traditions of India (*Hinduism*, *Jainism*, *Sikhism*, etc.) a *mala* (also known as *maala*, *Japamala* or *Jaap maala*) is a string of prayer beads

⁴⁶ In *Hinduism*, *kundalini* (from *Sanskrit*: 'coiled snake') is a dormant divine energy at the base of the spine that can be awakened through spiritual practices

⁴⁷ *Shavasana* (corpse pose) is a supine *yoga* posture of relaxation and restoration

⁴⁸ *Kapalabhati* is a *pranayama* (yogic breathing) and *kriya* (cleansing) technique, which consists of rapid, short exhales, followed by a long inhalation

⁴⁹ Reference to *yoga* postures (*asanas*) named after various animals: *marjariasana* (cat pose), *sasangasana* (rabbit pose), *garudasana* (eagle pose), *bakasana* (crow pose), *bhujangasana* (snake pose), *makarasana* (crocodile pose), *salabhasana* (locust pose) and *mandukasana* (frog pose)

⁵⁰ *Titli asana*; the butterfly pose

⁵¹ *Surya Namaskar* (literally: 'Sun Salutation') is a series of twelve *yoga* postures

⁵² *Lakh* a unit in the Indian numbering system; 1 lakh = 100,000

⁵³ Indian sarong

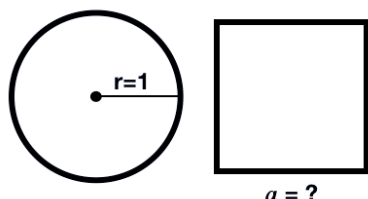
⁵⁴ In *Hinduism*, *chakras* (from *Sanskrit*: ‘wheels’) are energy centers in the body, along the spine. They get activated through *yoga*, meditation and other esoteric practices.

⁵⁵ In *Hindu* tradition, a *sannyasi* or *sannyasin* is a recluse, ascetic, renunciate, who has renounced the material world and his place/role in the society

⁵⁶ *Aghoris* are ascetic devotees of *Bhairava*, the fearful and destructive form of *Shiva*. They go against social taboos pertaining to death, by dwelling at cremation grounds, meditating on dead bodies, and using bones and human flesh to overcome duality.

⁵⁷ *Kamadeva* is the *Hindu* god of sensual love and desire. *Yamarāja* is the *Hindu* god of death and the underworld.

⁵⁸ For simplicity, we consider a unit circle (one of radius equal to 1 unit). Equating the areas of the unit circle and of the square, we get:



$r=1$

$a=?$

$$A_{circle} = A_{square}$$

$$\pi r^2 = a^2$$

$$\pi = a^2$$

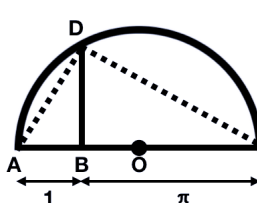
$$a = \sqrt{\pi}$$

So, how to construct a line segment of length π ? By using Leibniz formula for π :

$$\frac{\pi}{4} = 1 - \frac{1}{3} + \frac{1}{5} - \frac{1}{7} + \frac{1}{9} - \dots$$

Geometrically, it is easy to bisect, trisect or split a line segment into arbitrarily many segments of equal length. We start by drawing a line segment of length 1. We first split it into three equal parts (construct a segment of length $1/3$). We then construct a segment of length $1/5$. After infinitely many such steps, we would have constructed infinitely many line segments of corresponding lengths equal to $1/3, 1/5, 1/7, 1/9$, and so on. After alternatively adding and subtracting the successive segments to and from one another, a line segment of length $\pi/4$ would be constructed, and from it, a line segment of length π will directly be obtained.

The only task we are left with now, is to construct a segment of length equal to square root of π . To do this, we construct a semi-circle over a line segment of length $\pi+1$, as illustrated in the figure below; since the triangle $\triangle ABD$ is similar to $\triangle DBC$, their sides are proportional:



1 π

$$\frac{1}{BD} = \frac{BD}{\pi}$$

$$BD^2 = \pi$$

$$BD = \sqrt{\pi}$$

This way, we have constructed a line segment of length equal to square root of π ; and so, we have squared the circle in infinitely many (yet countably many) geometric steps.

⁵⁹ *Hti* (Burmese: sacred umbrella) is an umbrella-looking objet (finial) placed on the top of a *pagoda* spire; it is adorned with wind-chime bells and has decorative elements and elaborate, fine filigree details. Sometimes cast in precious metal and jewels, it is considered the most sacred part of the *pagoda*.

⁶⁰ *Thilāshin* (literally: ‘carrier/holder/keepers of the Precepts’, or the ethical code of *Buddhism*) is a Burmese term for women renunciates in *Theravada Buddhism*. *Thilā* comes from the *Pāli* word *sīla* (proper moral conduct, virtue) and *shin* (the carrier, the owner). Even though a *thilāshin* accepts a strict code of religious conduct, her status is not equivalent to that of a male renunciate ordained as a *bhikkhu*. The order of *bhikkhunis* (female monastic) has died out and, in spite of the large number of women renunciates, the tradition has not been revived due to various social and political reasons. Therefore, hierarchically, the *thilāshin* is somewhere between a lay(wo)man and a *sāmaṇera* (*Buddhist* novice). More precisely, she is placed in the category of *upāsikā* (‘pious laywomen’).

⁶¹ *Vipassana* is a traditional form of *Buddhist* meditation, now also popular in the West

⁶² Burmese word for a monk (from *Pāli*: *puñña*: merit and Burmese *gyi*: big, great)

⁶³ Burmese: *akútho* means a morally bad, unskillful, unwholesome or detrimental action, with a consequence of accumulating a negative (bad) *karma*. The origin of the word is the *Pāli* equivalent: *akusala*.

⁶⁴ Burmese: *kyaung* (sometimes *kyoung*) means a monastery

⁶⁵ Sarong, lower body ankle-length garment, made of a rectangular piece of cloth with ends stitched together like a skirt. It is a part of the traditional Burmese attire, worn by both men and women. It is tied around the waist (by making a knot when worn by a man, or a deep fold/pleat when worn by a woman).

⁶⁶ The robes of a *Buddhist* nun in Burma are typically pink, with a slight element of orange (typically the shawl folded over the shoulder) and/or the *antaravasaka* (the sarong-type part of the robe).

⁶⁷ *Bhikkhu* is an honorary title of an ordained monk in a *Buddhist* lineage. Literally, the word *bhikkhu* means ‘a beggar’ or an ‘almsman,’ and it refers to the spiritual practice of strictly living of alms collected in a daily ritual.

⁶⁸ *Ashin* is an honorary monastic title in Burmese *Theravada Buddhism*. It means ‘venerable’.

⁶⁹ Burma *Padauk*, known as the Burmese Rosewood (*Pterocarpus macrocarpus*) is a deciduous tree native to South East Asia. Its delicately fragrant, yellow flowers are considered a national symbol of Burma. The tree blooms around April, a period coinciding with *Thingyan*, the Water Festival (Burmese New Year).

⁷⁰ In *Theravada Buddhism*, the *Pāli* word *pāramī* (*Pāramitā* in *Sanskrit*) means perfection, spiritual virtue or quality. There are ten *pāramīs*: *Dāna* (generosity), *Sīla* (morality), *Nekkhamma* (renunciation), *Paññā* (wisdom), *Viriya* (effort), *Khanti* (patience), *Sacca* (truthfulness), *Adhiṭṭhāna* (determination), *Mettā* (loving-kindness) and *Upekkhā* (equanimity).

⁷¹ *Sangha* is the monastic community

⁷² In *Buddhism*, *mudras* are symbolic hand gestures, carrying specific links and meanings associated with the life and teachings of Buddha; as forms of non-verbal communication between a spiritual teacher and a disciple, mudras are an essential ritualistic tool in the Buddhist spiritual practice.

⁷³ *Kasaya* (Sanskrit: *Kāṣāya*) is the name given to the traditional robes worn by *Buddhist* monks and nuns. In Burma, where *Theravada Buddhism* is followed, the color of the robes is predominantly maroon or burgundy for monks, and pink with a dash of orange for nuns.

⁷⁴ *Dukkha* (Pāli, Sanskrit) is one of the fundamental concepts in *Buddhism*, translated as 'suffering', 'pain' or 'grief', but also as 'dissatisfaction' or 'anguish'. The four *Noble Truths* of Buddha are: 1. Life (existence) is suffering; 2. The reason for this suffering is craving/desire; 3. It is possible to end this suffering; and 4. The way to end this suffering is through following the *Eightfold Path*.

⁷⁵ From *Pāli* (Sanskrit equivalent: *nirvana*); literally means 'to blow out (the candle)'. It is the ultimate goal in *Buddhism*—cessation, freedom from the cycle of birth and rebirth; enlightenment.

⁷⁶ Rorschach test is a psychological tool containing an abstract inkblot with a bilateral symmetry; the subject is asked to say what he sees in the picture, and the responses are used by the psychologist for psychological and emotional profiling and diagnostics.

⁷⁷ 'Ye zet' in Burmese literally means 'a drop of water'. The *Buddhist* ritual of sprinkling water at a *pagoda* is called 'yezet chá'. There is a belief that when people do charity together, they are bound to meet again in the next life. When two people who have just met immediately feel drawn to one another, it is believed that this bond is actually a meritorious reunion, having roots in the act of sprinkling water together in a previous life.

⁷⁸ From *Pāli* (Sanskrit equivalent: *Dharma*). Buddha's teachings, the ultimate law, justice, virtue, discipline, truth, righteousness, reality.

⁷⁹ A meditation technique through which one cultivates compassion for all sentient beings, including ourselves

⁸⁰ The *Triple Gem* (Pāli: *Tiratana*) consists of *Buddha*, the *Dhamma* (Buddha's teachings), and *Sangha* (monastic community). *Buddhists* seek refuge in the *Triple Gem* by reciting the following verses in Pāli: *Buddham Saranam Gacchami, Dhammam Saranam Gacchami, Sangham Saranam Gacchami* (I go to the *Buddha* for refuge, I go to the *Dhamma* for refuge, I go to the *Sangha* for refuge).

⁸¹ From *Pāli* (Sanskrit equivalent: *karma*). According to the *Buddhist* doctrine, *kamma* is a sum of all deeds. The present circumstances in one's life are a sum of past deeds, including those performed during the past incarnations. *Kamma-vipaka* is the law of moral causation, action and consequence, where *kamma* is the deed (action) and *vipaka* is the consequence, the result. A person's *kamma* is a result of attachments and ignorance; the person can create good *kamma* and reduce the effect of bad *kamma* by gaining merit through good actions.

⁸² A *stupa* is a *Buddhist* architectural structure which enshrines sacred Buddha relics. Its can vary in shape, with some *stupas* resembling a small *pagoda*, and others have a mound, belled or domed-like appearance.

⁸³ The *stupas* of *Kuthodaw Paya* (The Royal Merit Pagoda) are known in Burmese as *kyauksa gu*. The phrase comes from *kyauksa*: stone engravings, and *gu*: a cave.

⁸⁴ *Kyat* is the Burmese currency

⁸⁵ Buddhist novice monk who has been initiated at a later age (thus the suffix *gyi*)

⁸⁶ *Sanghati* is the outer robe, and one of the three pieces of the traditional monastic clothes known as *kasaya*

⁸⁷ A mathematical method of approximating an integral (and thus the area of a shape or the volume of a rotating solid). When estimating the volume, the solid is split into smaller and smaller disks, whose sum of volumes will be approximately equal to the volume of the solid. In the case of infinitesimally small disks, the sum will be equal to the *Riemann integral*, i.e. to the exact volume of the solid.

⁸⁸ ‘(Everything is) transitory, sorrowful, unreal’; literally from *Pāli*: impermanence (nothing lasts), suffering, non-self (illusion of self)

⁸⁹ *Pāli*: *sutta* (*Sanskrit equivalent*: *sutra*)—a maxim, short statement, aphorism or a rule cited from a scripture (here, from the *Buddhist* tradition)

⁹⁰ *Hnyat-phanat* is traditional Burmese footwear, thong-like sandals

⁹¹ *Kyeezee* (Burmese bell) is a triangular, bell-shaped spinning/whirling gong or a cymbal. The flat bronze surface of the *kyeezee* is suspended from a string, and with a hit of the mallet it spins and produces a sound. *Kyeezee* bells are believed to ward off evil. They are also widely sold as popular souvenirs.

⁹² (*Both*) mind (*nama*) and matter (*rupa*)

⁹³ Burmese vernacular of the *Pāli*: *anicca, dukkha, anatta*

⁹⁴ Along with *mettā* (loving kindness), *mudita* (sympathetic joy) and *upekkha* (equanimity), *karuna* (from *Pāli*: compassion) is one of the four divine vihara (abodes or sublime states) of the *Theravada Buddhism*

⁹⁵ *Nats* are spirits, and the animistic worship of *nats* is still prevalent in Burma. Devout *Buddhist* laymen believe that celestial beings and spirits of the nature (both benevolent and malevolent ones) can be propitiated through acts such as building a shrine, making food offerings and ritual practices.

⁹⁶ *Zayat* (or *zeyat, zyat*) is a rest house, dwelling, a type of caravansary built by locals in almost every village and city. Laymen believe that, in addition to donating food to the monks during their morning alms round, and building a *pagoda*, the construction of a *zayat* is also a good way to gain merit. Even though the structure and the facilities are very simple (there is a roof, but most of the time no walls, only supporting pillars), the accommodation is free and unconditional.

⁹⁷ *Butea frondosa*

⁹⁸ *Pāli*: *pāramī*—in *Buddhism* there are ten *pāramī* (perfections) of a *buddha* (enlightened being). Laymen *Buddhists* consider these virtues or spiritual qualities an important factor in someone’s predisposition for becoming a monk or a nun.

⁹⁹ A play, dance, celebration, carnival or a festival in which many people participate. *Nat pwé*, or spirit festivals are particularly popular and occur annually at particular villages and cities.

¹⁰⁰ *Pouk*, or *pouk-pen* is the Burmese word for the *flame of the forest tree*

¹⁰¹ Traditional, low-cost, hand-made cigar, rolled in dried leaves and bark of selected trees, and filled with tobacco and aromatic herbs

¹⁰² Burmese: wrap (known in India as *paan*), made of betel leaves wrapped around *Areca* nuts, slacked lime and various dried herbs such as cardamom and clove.

¹⁰³ Mythical leogryph creature; large *chinthe* statues are found across Burma and other southeast Asian countries. They are typically placed in pairs at the entrance of a *pagoda*, and are regarded as guardians of the shrine.

¹⁰⁴ Burmese: lotus

¹⁰⁵ Burmese: jasmine

¹⁰⁶ Burmese: yellow ginger lily

¹⁰⁷ The name of the conical shaped net that rests around a bamboo frame, traditionally used by fisherman at Inle Lake

¹⁰⁸ A Tibeto-Burman ethnic group of people living around Inle Lake in the Shan State, Burma. *Intha* literally means ‘sons of the lake.’

¹⁰⁹ Parasol is a traditional Burmese sun-shade umbrella, used as an accessory (particularly during the dry season). Due to its artistic appeal and fashionability, nowadays it is also used for interior decoration).

¹¹⁰ Literally: the wheel of *Dhamma*. One of the oldest symbols of Buddhism, it represents Buddha and His teachings. Some of the meanings include the nature of *samsara* (wheel of law, cycle of life), and Buddha’s *Eightfold Path*.

¹¹¹ Burmese: one who consumes opium

¹¹² This is a math reference; the simplest version of the pigeonhole principle (literally) states that if n pigeons are to be placed in m pigeonholes, where $n > m$ (there are more pigeons than pigeonholes), then at least one pigeonhole must contain more than one pigeon. Named after the 19th century German mathematician Peter Gustav Lejeune Dirichlet, this intuitively straightforward counting argument has applications in set theory, probability, statistics, geometry, computer science, etc.

¹¹³ *Thabeik* is a donation/begging/alms bowl which monks carry with them to collect alms. Also called *patta* in *Pāli*.

¹¹⁴ *Kútho* means merit, a morally good, positive and karmically wholesome action that leads to favorable *karma* in the next life. It is a Burmese word which has origin in the *Pāli* word *kusala*.

¹¹⁵ A *hsaya* is a Burmese word for a master or an expert (here in the context of esoteric disciplines)

¹¹⁶ *Zedi*, *pagoda*

¹¹⁷ *Pāli*: *parinibbāna*, *Sanskrit*: *parinirvāṇa*. It is the state of *nibbāna* which Buddha entered at the time of his death in this material plane. It denotes the ultimate freedom of the cycle of death and rebirth attained at the moment of the cessation of the physical life.

¹¹⁸ A Burmese saying

¹¹⁹ *Pāli*: *marāṇa* (death) and *sati* (awareness); *marāṇasati* (death mindfulness) is a *Buddhist* practice of meditating on death.

¹²⁰ *Latin*: ‘Remember death’ (remember you are mortal); a phrase associated with medieval European *Christianity*, aimed to remind the individual of vanity and perishability of life

¹²¹ The *Pāli* version of the *Sanskrit nirvana*: cessation, freedom from the cycle of life and rebirth (*samsara*)

¹²² Literally: ‘Cultivation of Compassion’

¹²³ Burmese proverb

¹²⁴ *Seik pa de* (or *Seik badi*) are prayer beads used by *Theravada* monks and lay devotees in Burma

¹²⁵ Chief monk, honorary *Buddhist* title in Burma

¹²⁶ A novice male monastic in a *Buddhist* context

¹²⁷ *Canna indica*, also known in Burma as *Bohdha Tharanat* flower

¹²⁸ Cosmologically, *Mount Meru* is the center of the Burmese *Buddhist* universe

¹²⁹ Burmese fortune-teller, soothsayer

¹³⁰ Traditional notebooks folded like accordions, made of bamboo, palm leaves or mulberry leaves. *Parabaiks* have been used to record sacred scriptures, historical accounts, art work, etc.

¹³¹ Traditional large and heavy manuscript box/chest, carved and gilded, usually kept at a prominent place within a monastery

¹³² A mathematical/spiritual wordplay; here ‘right’ is used both in the context of geometry (90° angle) and as a moral category (proper, good, upright). This is a reference to the eight divisions (*Buddhist* practices) in Buddha’s *Noble Eightfold Path*: right view, right resolve or intention, right speech, right conduct or action, right effort, right mindfulness, and right *samadhi* (concentration).

Beset with a deep sense of alienation, Alexander, a middle-aged Scandinavian mathematician with a bent for the metaphysical, begins to question everything, from his failed relationships to his declining career prospects and the attainability of happiness. On a cold winter night, a seemingly random encounter with a stranger obtrudes onto him an unsought responsibility over a dog and a series of bargains with eccentric individuals. Caught up in piquant musings on the crossings of poetry, mysticism, and mathematical paradoxes of infinity, he is unknowingly initiated into a unique esoteric group of seekers and newfangled anchorites.

The experience turns into a springboard for a daring new escapade into a life of self-discovery and reconciliation. In an effort to find answers to his troubled love affairs and ambivalent relation to religion, the once reticent loner undertakes a spiritual experiment in the East. He leaves his comfortable but predictable life behind, and becomes a seeker.

From the yoga ashrams of India to the Buddhist monasteries of Burma, this spiritual novel takes the reader on a pilgrimage through the thicket of human insecurities and aspirations. Alexander learns to navigate the perilous landscape of modern spirituality, con-masters and authentic teachers, and as a result he discovers, articulates and manifests his own response to the baits of love and faith, radically different from the ones he had once held.

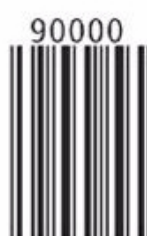


Lidiya Stankovikj is the author of the contemporary social novel 'The Outcasts - A Thousand Dreams of Redemption'. For over a decade, she has worked in the areas of education, sustainability, international development and wellness/spirituality. She has lived in India, Burma (Myanmar), Sweden, Switzerland and Macedonia. She holds degrees in Mathematics, Management of International Organizations and Contemporary Asian Studies. 'Alexander's Infinity' is her second book.



www.ukiyoto.com

ISBN 9789354901119



9 789354 901119